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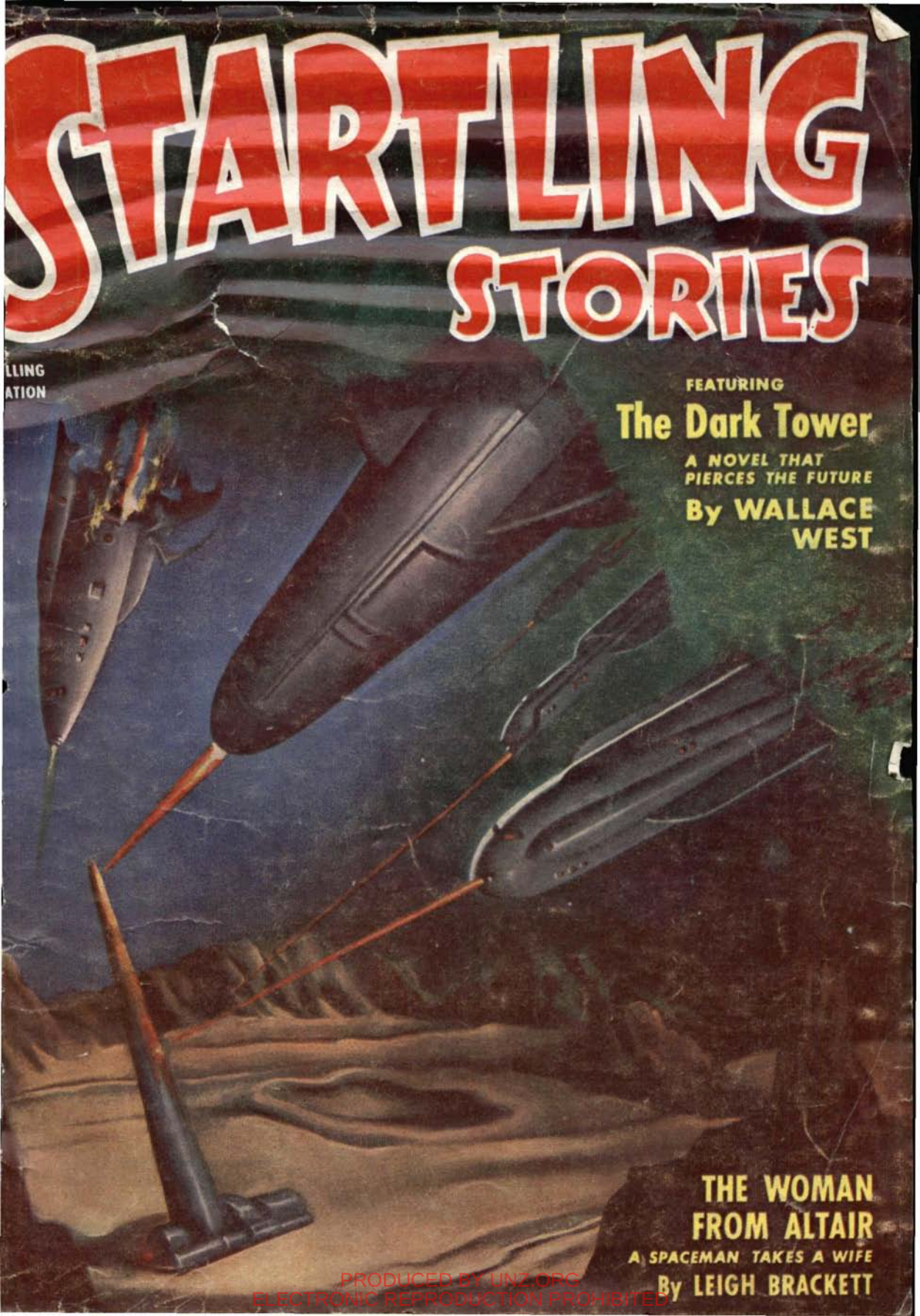

FEATURING

The Dark Tower

A NOVEL THAT PIERCES THE FUTURE

By WALLACE WEST

THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR

A SPACEMAN TAKES A WIFE

By LEIGH BRACKETT

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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 23, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION July, 1951

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SAM MERWIN, JR., *Editor*

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AT LEADING STORES COAST-TO-COAST

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IN recent years, usually with considerable publicity fanfare, science fiction or at least pseudo-scientific fantasy has been popping up in all sorts of entertainment media other than the pulp magazines that for more than twenty-five years have been its chief, at times its sole, field of expression. Today, it seems to us, would be a good time to take a look at this generally tenuous and tentative expansion, weigh its merits and possibilities, study its current failures and successes.

Actually, of course, science fantasy goes back at least to the Iliad—for surely Mr. Homer's wooden horse was for its time fully as complex and imaginative a weapon as any of those dreamed up in latter days by H. G. Wells or even Dr. Smith. The Greek dramatists and all that have followed have never hesitated to draw heavily upon fantasy whenever so impelled to increase the audience-effectiveness of their works.

The fabulous universes created by early theologians—universes which found direct expression in sacred books, in the passion plays, in such literature and non-fictional writings as were then permitted—are scarcely more speculative than the galactic empires of such modern science fiction authors as Clifford Simak, Isaac Asimov or Leigh Brackett, to name but a few. Certainly Beelzebub and his pitchfork-bearing legions were in their time more thoroughly believed than the octopoid Martians of Wells or the lobblies of Mr. Mergenthwerker himself.

The Need for Belief

Perhaps a more sophisticated world can no longer believe in such theological illogic —but it is still searching madly for something in which it can believe—else neither Dialectic Materialism nor Mohandas Gandhi could have existed at all. Perhaps, in sublimated form, science fiction itself is no more than an expression of this desire to combine credence and possibility.

At any rate, we have had science fiction with us now for the better part of three decades in its so-called "modern" form—this, incidentally, is a semantic meaning which eludes us as completely as a mosquito eludes a man wearing boxing gloves. And our stf mosquito has been buzzing around in other fields of late.

This is all to the good. The more people reached by stf concepts, the more people likely to become addicts. Hence, via channels not exactly hard to follow, the more readers for science fiction magazines—and that is something we definitely desire. But we have not, alas, been able to discover much that seems to us likely to help the growth of the field in such efforts as we have seen to date.

The drama—the post-World-War-One drama, that is—has turned to fantasy at least as often as in previous periods and, in Karel Kapek's R.U.R., produced an outstanding stf drama before the pulp magazine devoted to science fantasy was born. At this writing, out of twenty-five advertised Broadway shows, no less than four—ANGEL IN THE PAWNSHOP, BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE, OUT OF THIS WORLD and THE LADY'S NOT FOR BURNING—have fantastic or at least supernatural bases. So we can scarcely count the drama as a new medium for such subjects.

The same can be said of the movies. After all, THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI was produced back in 1918 and Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS followed it by a scant few years. The procession moves directly and with scarcely a gap to last year's DESTINATION MOON and the new pictures, either finished or in the making, that have yet to hit the nation's screens this season.

(Continued on page 131)

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KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

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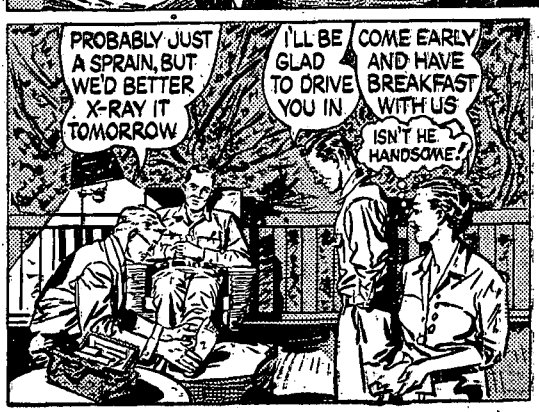
BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

AN HOUR LATER
DOC PETERS IS COMING AFTER SUPPER. WON'T YOU STAY AND SHARE OUR TROUT?
THANK YOU, YES! BUT WITH THIS BEARD I MUST LOOK LIKE A TRAMP
USE MY RAZOR IF YOU'D LIKE TO SHAVE

THESE ARE THE SLICKEST-SHAVING BLADES I'VE EVER RUN ACROSS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES, EH? WELL, THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN


PROBABLY JUST A SPRAIN, BUT WE'D BETTER X-RAY IT TOMORROW
I'LL BE GLAD TO DRIVE YOU IN
COME EARLY AND HAVE BREAKFAST WITH US
ISN'T HE HANDSOME!

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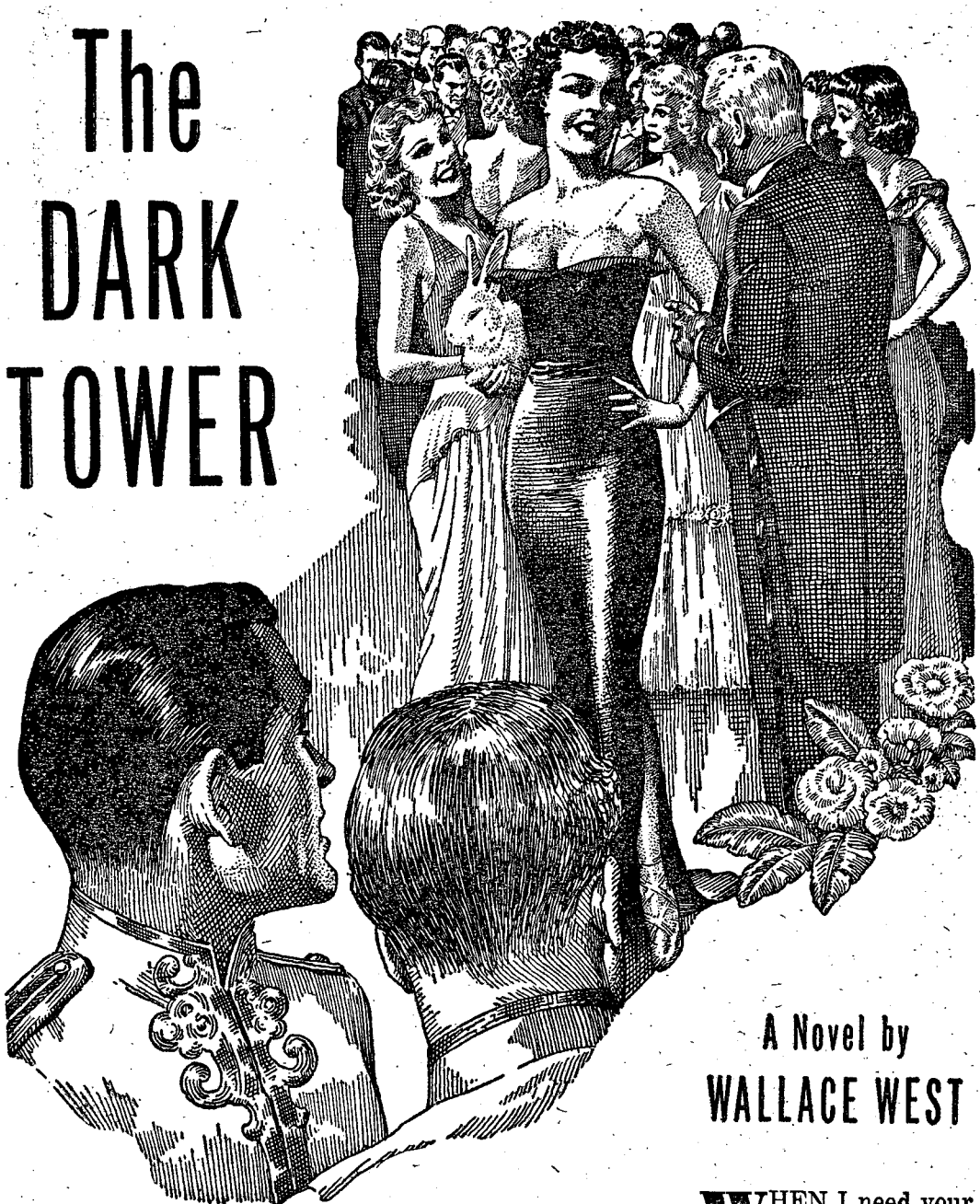
The DARK TOWER



A Novel by
WALLACE WEST

With the universe divided against itself and chivvied by an invisible foe, last-ditch leadership devolves upon a young space admiral and a telepathic beauty!

WHEN I need your advice, *Lieutenant* Commander," cooed the admiral, "I shall send you a plascript!"

"But sir," his husky tow-headed aide ventured to protest. "Lieutenant Pancrief can

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make it right in the lab. It's just a refinement of an ancient sniperscope. Infra-red radiations from the bodies of the Siriuns—if they have bodies, of course—would register on micro-film. They need never know."

"Hah!" Admiral Mendez slammed a hairy fist on his empty desk-top. "Can you keep those devils from reading your thoughts? I can't any more!"

"They never probe the minds of non-depositors, sir. To be extra safe, though, Lieutenant Pancrief could build a thought scrambler. There's a description of a primitive one in a book I have."

"*Books!*" Mendez seemed about to spit. "Books have ruined more good C.S.N. men than have been killed by the barbarians. Stick to tri-di training films, Merek my boy." His bristle of moustache lifted in a smile. "Better chance of advancement that way."

"Yes sir," muttered Merek.

"Let me brief you once more on our position here." The Admiral spoke as to a naughty child. "We are guests of the Siriuns. We are seeking an alliance to combat aggression by the barbarians of Omega Centauri against the planets of Alpha, Beta and Proxima Centauri. If our hosts prefer to remain invisible it is good diplomacy to respect their wishes."

"How can we negotiate on even terms, sir, with beings no one has ever seen? Oh yes, Siriun merchant ships visit our star system. But no Centauran has ever seen, smelled or even touched a Siriun. We're working in the dark, both literally and figuratively. If you would only—"

"Sorry. I have my orders from the Merconian Council—and you have yours, sir. Dismissed!" Then, as his aide turned to leave the cabin, the admiral went completely out of character. "I can't have any insubordination here, Merek," he almost pleaded as he rubbed stubby fingers across his forehead. "I haven't mentioned it before, but I'm a year overdue with my Memory Bank deposit.

"My mind is all cluttered up like an old attic. I've got to get this conference over with before I become senile. Please

A Bow to Byron

WHEN is a space opera not a space opera? The answer is not hard to come by—when it is so thoroughly crammed with ideas, with interesting and credible characters, with totally unexpected incident that it moves up into epic ranks.

Whether or not Mr. West's new novel rates the epic stamp is, of course, up to those of you that read it. But certainly it is a far cry from the old-style adventure story that claimed a place in science fiction merely because its action took place on Mars or perhaps Ganymede rather than in the South Seas, Africa or the cattle ranches of the Old Southwest.

Certainly its people are credible—from Iskra, the ferociously lovely "barb" to Marian, the human calculating machine and Mendez, the fouled-up space-admiral. Certainly it is packed with ideas—from the insidious Memory Bank to the secret of the barbarian conquest of hyper-space and the ultimate weapon employed by the invisible Siriuns to hold a galaxy in thrall. And certainly in conjunction, these characters and ideas, are woven into a pattern of unexpected incident.

We have never been overstrong for space opera per se—somehow we doubt its place in any but the lowest echelons of science fiction publishing—but when we get one like THE DARK TOWER, we buy it quickly and rush it into print. Incidentally, as those who attain the final paragraphs will discover for themselves, the title is culled directly from *Childe Harolde*, a poem by one George Gordon, otherwise and variously known as Lord Byron. We have a hunch that Byron himself would have been a rabid science fictioneer had he not lived and died a century or more too soon.

—THE EDITOR.

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don't confuse me with those crazy ideas of yours. If you wish to present your proposal through the proper channels—seventeen copies and all that—I will see that it is forwarded to the Council."

"Where it will be pigeonholed, as you know, sir."

"*Dismissed*, I said!" roared the admiral, his old self again. And, after Merek had squeezed his wide shoulders through the doorway he muttered, "Insolent young puppy. Can't be a day over fifty! Needs discipline. Yes, yes. Mustn't forget *that!* Discipline!" He made a note to consider the matter, then pulled himself together and started preparing for the next session with the Siriuns, which was only two hours away.

IN his tiny cabin Merek nursed a towering grouch and a forbidden bottle of Scopio while he considered tendering his resignation from the Centauran Space Navy. *Unh-uh!* The Old Man wouldn't accept it. Had to have a whipping boy. He took a stiff drink and breached another rule by slitting a light-tight shutter and peering into the darkness outside the flagship on the off-chance that he might catch a glimpse of a Siriun. His only reward was the sight of fluttery fog fingers pawing the heavy pane.

He closed the shutter with a wry grimace and reached automatically for one of the dog-eared centuries-old books dealing with guerrilla warfare which lined the shelves he had built over his bunk. Then he shook his rough-hewn head and snapped the tri-di switch instead. If the Old Man wanted him to watch films, watch them he would—or watch *it*, rather, since there was only one in the ship's library he enjoyed.

A two-foot-square shadow box in the cabin wall filled with misty light. The light solidified, took form as a room with walls filled to the ceiling by panels of automatic calculators and Memory Bank indexes. A girl, dressed in a simple white chiton, sat on a chair of antique

MARIAN

After a thousand years of study, she knew all the answers, except how to make her Memory Bank work

design in the center of that room. Naked feet, crossed primly at slim ankles, aristocratic hands folded, ash-blond hair piled in a coronet of braids above her broad forehead—Marian, Secretary of the Council which ruled the three habitable planets of the Alpha Centauri star system, was ready to give another of her famous lectures.

Merek made himself comfortable on the bunk, poured himself a drink and doused the lights so the tri-dimensional picture stood out in full depth and life-like colors. The figure in the shadow box seemed to lose its doll-like dimensions, to give the illusion of appearing life-size before him. Its aloof ageless beauty took his breath away. Almost a millenium old, they said—and still in the bloom of youth.

"Marian! Marian!" he sighed. "*You* would understand if I could talk to you instead of going through Mendez's confounded channels."

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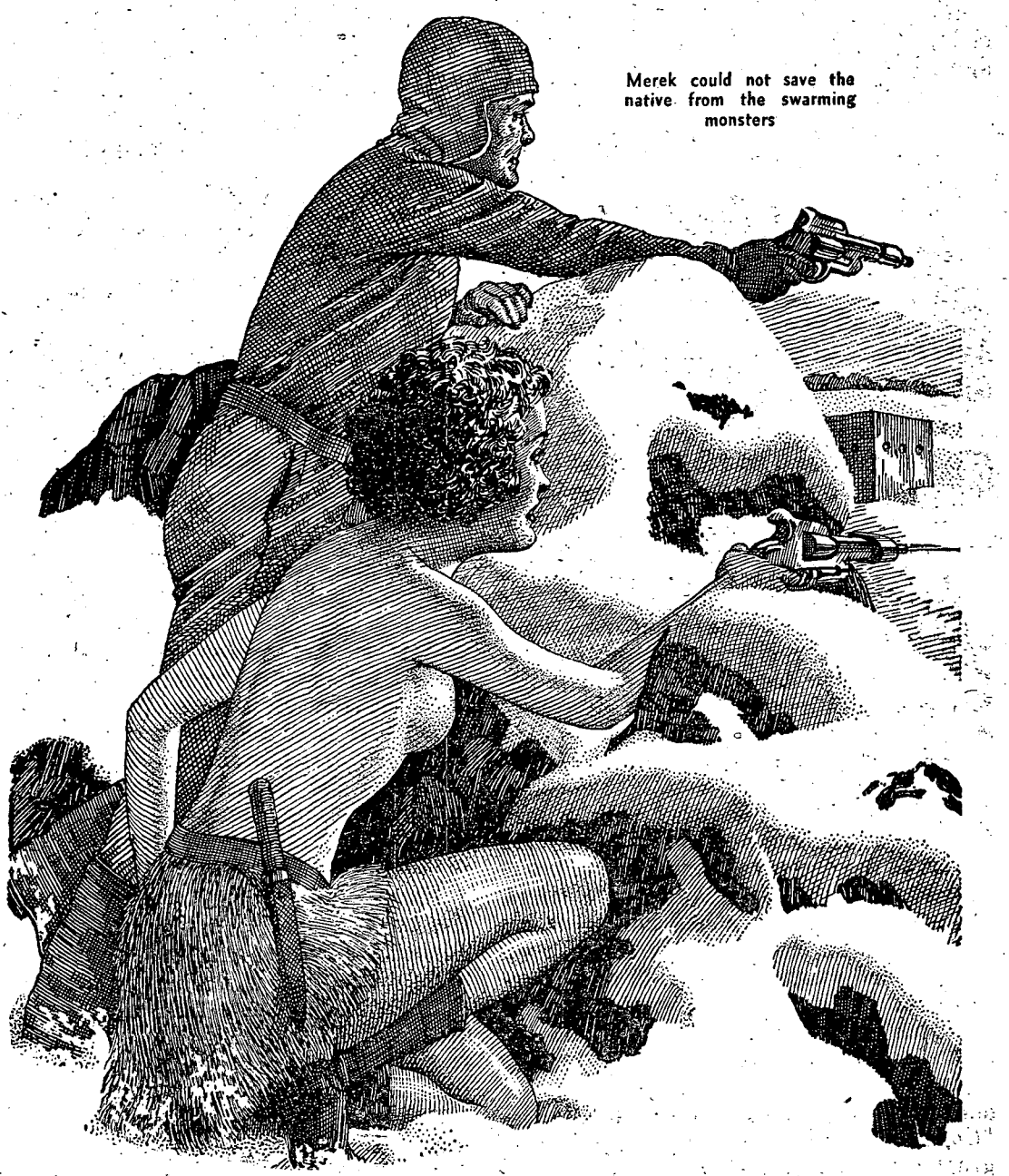
As if in answer, the girl's somewhat thin but perfect lips parted, her breasts rose proudly under the translucent silk and she began to speak in a voice that was compounded of distant bells and trumpets.

"Friends," she said, "let me tell you of the days when our glorious ancestors fled from dying Earth to find freedom on the planets of Centaurus. It is unfortunate that memories of those heroic times have had to be removed from the minds of older Centaurans. Yet books are full of thrilling exploits of the Prime Generation and of the Second Generation to which I belong. We should all



Merek could not save the native from the swarming monsters

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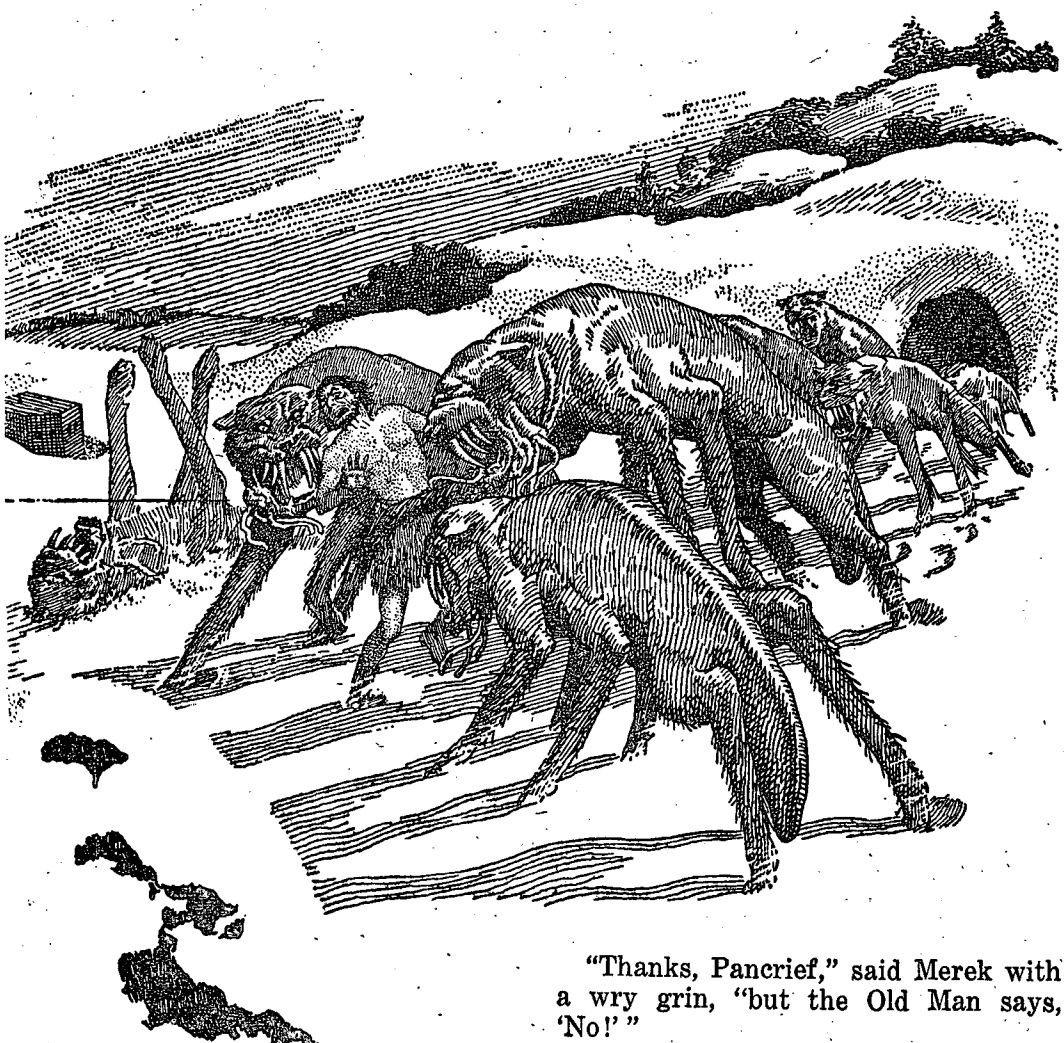
read those books without fail. They will make all of us proud that we are Centaurans—proud to defend our planets from barbarian attack and willing . . ."

There was a rap on the cabin door. Merek stopped the film, turned up the lights and dilated the opening.

"Your super-sniperscope. Just finished it. Substitute it for a regulation button, get within a hundred feet of a Siriun and unless he, she or it is a lot colder than a dead fish you'll be able to determine whether he shaved this morning when you develop the film."



A long man entered—a man so tall and lean he seemed two-dimensional. "*Got* it!" chortled the newcomer with a great bobbing of his adam's apple. He held out a long lean hand on which reposed a C.S.N. uniform button.

"Got what?" yawned Merek, resealing the door and proffering the Scopio.

"Thanks, Pancrief," said Merek with a wry grin, "but the Old Man says, 'No!' "

"You going to take it lying down?"

"What else? He's just waiting for a chance to break me."

"Um!" Pancrief tossed the button on the bed and upended the bottle. "Well, it's not my funeral but I do think someone around here should do something besides chin with spooks. I might add that it would take a smart spook to de-

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tect that sniperscope."

His roving eye fell upon the shadow box where Marian's image sat immobile, washed out and vaguely accusing, her pretty mouth open. "Didn't know I was interrupting a tryst." He winked. "Pray continue."

"Nuts," said his friend but he cut the lights and started the film.

". . . . to fight to the death to defend our way of life," the Council Secretary resumed exactly where she had left off.

"That old rabble rouser," groaned Pancrief. "If you must listen to the witch why not get some of her scientific lectures? They're good. But this patriotic blather. *Phooey!*"

"Happens to be the only one of her talks aboard." Merek sat up so quickly he banged his head on the low ceiling. "As for your calling Marian a—"

"Excuse me. Excuse me. I meant no disrespect to Her Intelligence. But let me warn you in all seriousness, pal, mooning over the Council Secretary is a waste of time. You're not in her class—not while you have to wipe the Old Man's nose every time he sneezes." Pancrief made a lightning jab at the door latch and dived through the opening in time to escape the boot which his friend hurled after him.

MORE out of sorts than ever, Merek switched off the neglected tri-di, turned up the lights and started pacing the cabin. Three steps forward—turn—three steps back—turn. He had been doing that for a solid year now, ever since the flagship Alpha had landed and the interminable conferences had begun. The whole of the Dark Planet was off-limits to Centaurans.

Pancrief was right, of course. Besides being handicapped by his extreme youth and kept in virtual poverty by his lack of Memory Bank dividends Merek was cordially detested by his Second Generation admiral because he dared make suggestions. He was trapped. He would remain a lieutenant commander for another half century—unless he were demoted or sent home to Mercon in disgrace.

The button on the bed caught his eye. He picked the thing up. A work of art, he decided, like all of Pancrief's gadgets, with an almost invisible switch on the rim to start and stop the camera hidden inside. He started to drop it in the waste chute, then hesitated. He hadn't much time to lose. The Old Man would get him sooner or later. The conference with the Siriuns was scheduled to resume in 40 minutes. With fingers that trembled slightly, he twisted a button off his uniform jacket and substituted the super-sniperscope.

Every light on the flagship blinked out as conference time approached. The main port was unsealed and opened upon the grey nothingness outside. A guard of honor commanded by Merek lined up stiffly at attention along the pitch black gangway leading to Admiral Mendez's quarters.

"We are here, puny human!"

The words were not spoken. They grated like rusty needles on the cortex of Merek's brain. He saluted and escorted the whispers into the conference room, where, he knew, Mendez stood sweating and uncomfortable behind his empty desk. Then he unlimbered his pocket steno, preparatory to taking notes on the meeting.

"Despicable Centauran," the silent needle skittered at Mendez, "we have consulted our—superiors. Your proposals for an alliance with us are beneath contempt!"

"But why, Your Magnificence?" The admiral's rasping voice shattered the stillness of the room. "You have a profitable trade with the Centauran planets as the result of the treaty you and I negotiated hundreds of years ago. That trade will be lost if the barbarians conquer Centaurus. Emperor Rolph and his wild men despise all luxuries. If they seize the resources of Mercon, Arcon and Pizar they will have no need for your wares."

"True," grated a second needle, rust-

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ier and blunter than the first, "but we Siriuns can wait. As they become civilized the barbarians will learn to value Siriun luxuries as much as you do. But you are decadent while they are members of a more virile human strain. Therefore they will breed and multiply as you do not. Soon their requirements for Siriun goods will exceed yours. To put it bluntly Sirius stands to profit greatly by your extermination."

"But—but—" exploded the admiral, "it was you Siriuns who originally forced the Centauran planets to limit their populations. That stipulation is in our trade treaty."

"True," screeched the thought of the first Siriun like a fingernail drawn across tin, "but circumstances have altered. Shall we conclude this ridiculous conference, worm?"

Realizing that time had suddenly begun to run out, Merek brushed a hand across the breast of his tunic.

"Wait, Your Magnificence!" By heroic effort Mendez managed to ignore the Siriun's studied insult. "The Council authorizes me to enlarge our offer. If there is an alliance Centaurus will reveal to you the secret of its Memory Bank."

"That thought was in your mind when you arrived here," mocked Needle Two. "Why have you not voiced it before?"

"Well, uh . . ." The admiral wished once again that he had made his Bank deposit on schedule. With his overcrowded brain churning like the Coal Sack he was proving no match for these invisible Machiavellis. "Centaurans—uh—like to bargain. I—"

"Something is amiss! Needle #1 jabbed. "I sense danger!"

"What, Your Magnificence?" gasped the admiral as Merek hurriedly adjusted his tie.

"I do not know. Let it pass. Our—superiors will want to consider your Memory Bank offer for ten sleeps. Await our return." The needlers departed without further ceremony like gusts of wind.

As soon as he had presumably ushered out their visitors, sealed the port and turned on the ship's lights Merek headed for the micro-lab. As he expected he found the gangling Pancrief puttering there. He handed over the button without comment. Moments later its ½-mm. film was in a pan of developer. Minutes later the two conspirators stared blankly at a uniformly fogged thread of plastic.

"Overexposed," snarled Merek, tossing it aside.

"*No!*" Pancrief grabbed the film and held it under a magnifier. "Double exposed! There's something—or somethings—here." He pointed to a smudge which appeared on each frame. "Our ghosties are smarter than I thought. They managed to fog the film right in the camera."

"Or in the developing tank!" Merek looked over his shoulder. "How do we know they left the ship?"

"Guess we're younger than we think!" Pancrief fumbled at a cigarette.

A squawk-box in the laboratory ceiling sputtered, "Lieutenants Merek and Pancrief. Report to admiral's quarters at once!"

"'Lieutenants'," sighed Pancrief. "The brig yawns for us."

It was a grey but thoroughly furious Mendez who faced them. Having just recevied a nasty kicking he was bent on passing it along. "The Siriuns have communicated with me by radio," he barked. "They ask your immediate deportation. Anything to say?"

"Only that the sniperscope film was fogged in some way," Merek answered. "We got no pictures, sir."

Mendez was not placated. "So you made a monkey out of me for nothing," he raged. "Insubordination—plus inefficiency. A disgrace to the service. Each of you is reduced one grade." He lunged around the desk and ripped a stripe off their sleeves. "A Siriun ship leaves for Pizar at twenty-one hundred. You will be on board. When you reach Pizar—"

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"*If* we reach Pizar, sir," Merek corrected.

"If you reach Pizar report to Rear Admiral Patterson for further disciplining. That is all—except that punishment for second offenses will be dishonorable discharge and withdrawal of Memory Bank privileges. Dismissed!"

Did the culprits sense a faint squeal of Siriun merriment as they were marched back to their quarters under guard?

II

MEREK and his friend remembered nothing of the trip back to Centaurus. They made it under suspended animation, not only to conserve precious food and air but to keep them from spying out any Siriun secrets. How much time did the journey require? Well, that is always a moot question at faster-than-light speeds. Viewed from a fixed point in space the Sirius-Centaurus hop probably consumed quite a number of years. But since there were no fixed spatial points time aboard the ship slowed down in exact ratio to a similar slowing down of clocks on Centaurus.

According to the Lorentz transformation there could be no possible distinction between the speed of the ship and the speed of the home planet which might be said with equal justice to be rushing toward it. The end result was that the subjective time elapsed on a flight several light years long usually was only a matter of weeks to all concerned.

But the two disgraced officers did not concern themselves with paradoxes when they recovered consciousness to find themselves lying on the chilly pavement of Pizar City spaceport. Almost blinded by the wan light of little Proxima, they stood up groggily and squinted about in search of the Naval Base building. Finally they had to ask directions from a group of servo mechanisms which had shoved the end of a portable conveyor into the globe of darkness which was the Siriun ship and were waiting to receive the gossamer laces, light-as-air fabrics and other exquisite artifacts as they came sliding down the belt.

"Sunshine!" sighed Pancrief as he lit a cigarette and drew a deep, pure breath of smoke. "God, it's good to be home and in sunshine, even if home is only a second rate planet. Another month of murk would have made me as crazy as the Old Man."

"What kind of chap is Patterson?" Merek asked as they started off toward the base.

"Pizarian, of course, with that name. Bit of a playboy. No love lost between him and Mendez. Maybe it won't be so bad."

"Be seated, gentlemen," the rear admiral said civilly enough when they stumbled into his office. "I have received a message from Admiral Mendez regarding your breach of discipline. *Tsk! Tsk!*" A frosty twinkle showed in world-weary grey eyes. "He asks that I discipline you further. Ahem!" He pulled at a long nose. "The only way I can do that is to restore you to your former ranks and work you to death."

They goggled at him.

"You'll have a twenty-four-hour-a-day job," Patterson snapped. "The base is undermanned. I have ten out-of-date cruisers with which to protect the whole planet. One of them, the *Shark*, is grounded for overhaul. You will report to her Captain Penn at once.

"What you tried to do out on Sirius was commendable in my worthless opinion as a Pizarian. Let us say no more about the matter—except that if I ran to the Council before I made every move Pizar would have been in barbarian hands a year ago. One thing more, gentlemen. You are to be my guests at the Planetary Ball tonight. Report here at twenty hours. No thanks, please. You are dismissed."

* * * * *

"Velvet." Pancrief sighed several

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hours later as he draped his lank body over a bunk in the double cabin to which they had been assigned by Captain Penn. "I can't understand it."

"I can." Merek was removing the beard that had grown over his square jaws during their period of unconsciousness. "Did you take a look 'round the port?"

"Looks no different than when I left here five years ago. Discipline a bit lax but we Pizarians happen to be like that. Comes of being the orphans of the system."

"The place is just begging for trouble. It's on peacetime footing."

"Who'd bother with Pizar?" Pancrief dragged himself partially erect and reached for the tube of depilatory. "The only real Centauran wealth is on Mercon and Arcon."

"How about women?"

"'Pizarian girls are fair as pearl,'" Pancrief sang in a clear tenor which belied his ugly mug. "So what?"

"Come off it, Pan! Rolph's barbarians are hard up for wives. I don't quite know why—perhaps some factor in the environment out in Omega that favors male births. Already they've made three minor raids on Pizar. Meantime most of our fleet is guarding Mercon and Arcon. We've landed on a powder keg."

"Maybe we'll see some action at last." The lieutenant brightened.

"If you were a barbarian," said Merek as he started getting into his freshly cleaned and pressed uniform, "and you wanted to snatch the prettiest and most dissatisfied women on Pizar, where and when would you stage a big raid for that purpose?"

Pancrief stopped towelling the whiskers off his face and stared. "I'd raid the plush Planetary Ball tonight," he said at last.

"Quite!"

Merek buckled on his dress sword and automatic.

"Let's go talk to Captain Penn about this."

THE captain, a jovial little man with a high opinion of his commanding officer, was not greatly impressed.

"We have thought of the danger and taken steps to meet it," he chuckled. "The ballroom will be surrounded by a double cordon of our best men. Two cruisers will be overhead at all times and two others will be on the alert as they patrol nearby."

"What if the barbarians try to infiltrate the ball?" asked Merek, thinking in terms of guerrilla warfare as usual.

"Have you ever met a barbarian?"

"When I was in college I knew one pretty well. He was—"

"They stand out like sore thumbs," Penn interrupted. "The few I've seen actually smelled." He tapped a perfumed handkerchief to his aristocratic nose. "And they talk the most outlandish jargon. Even if they put on civilized clothing you could spot them a mile off."

"You don't think we should remain on board tonight, sir?"

"No use. She won't be spaceworthy till tomorrow. No, you come along with me. The admiral is waiting." Penn straightened his sword, adjusted his cap to just the right angle and led the way.

Little Pizar outdid itself for its one important social event of the year. A poor planet whose inhabitants devoted themselves mainly to agriculture and to space-shipbuilding it went all out tonight in an effort to show that it bowed to neither Mercon nor Arcon.

As they zoomed across town in Patterson's flying limousine they could see that the streets were festooned with lights and that those not fortunate enough to get invitations to the ball itself were holding their own dances in less imposing buildings. The sound of music drifted up to them through the frosty air. Sidewalks and squares already were filled with merrymakers.

"What a set-up," Pancrief whispered in his friend's ear.

With some difficulty they found parking space on the roof of the governor's

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mansion. They descended the stairs to the main ballroom, making the most of their white skintight uniforms, gold braid and clinking swords. All about them rose a sea of handsome faces—but Merek had never seen so many sulky prettily-pouting girls in one place before.

"What's the matter with your countrywomen?" he asked Pancrief. "Most of them look mad enough to bite nails."

"Envy, that cancerous growth, is gnawing at their sweet vitals," the other grinned. "Mercon's Planetary Ball last year was held on a specially constructed platform floating above the capital. One of the seven ballrooms was equipped with anti-gravs so tired couples could float to music and rest their dogs. Pizar can't afford to put on a show like that. Sort of spoils the fun for a lot of folks."

"It would serve them right if the barbarians did come," said Merek.

"I suspect that some of the girls feel that way too."

Governor Price, son of the founder of Pizar's First Family, greeted them effusively at the bottom of the stairs. His wife, whose eyes were too bright, whose lips were too red and who wore a tiny live lizard on the shoulder of her scarlet dress, seized upon Patterson, scolded him for being late and swept him out on the floor. Her leggy daughter made off with Captain Penn. Merek and Pancrief gravitated toward the bar and found places under the life-size smiling tri-di photographs of President Franklin and Secretary Marion of the Council.

They ordered Scopio instead of their usual beer. Merek lifted his glass to the lovely creature looking down on him.

"Merek, my son," said Pancrief, draining his free drink and signaling the servo for another, "I wish you would forget that dame on the wall and look about you for a partner amongst the beauty and—to put it politely—the youth of Pizar."

"They eat persimmons," grunted the commander.

"True. But they have their points or should I say curves."

"Yes, I must admit that this new fad for ancient Greek draperies is better than the one in vogue when I was at school."

"The time when people tried to look like robots and make robots look like people?" Pancrief chuckled. "That was bad."

"Another fad seems to be aborning," said Merek. "Notice how many girls have brought pets to the ball. There's a girl with a parrot on her shoulder."

"That one has a hamster—and her companion has a white mouse. Brr! I'd rather have my Pizarian girls neat. They lose their inhibitions after a few drinks incidentally."

"Let 'em keep 'em," said Merek, looking from face to lovely face and not liking what he found there. Was it, he pondered, that they had lived too long—and too well—despite their wails of poverty? Was the boon of almost everlasting life a curse in disguise? Was Pizar, along with the other Centauran planets, dying of dry rot?

"How does that one strike you?" Pancrief jogged his elbow.

MEREK looked and drew breath through his teeth. Not ten feet from him stood a *girl!* She was tall—all of six feet. Her blue-black hair curled in ringlets about a head a sculptor would have envied. There was a faint bridge of freckles across a retroussé nose. Her mouth was generously large. Her chin had a dimple. Her throat was round and deeply tanned in contrast to the milk-white women about her. Her shoulders were those of a swimmer, rising defiantly from a topless black silk sheath. Her . . .

"Now, *now!*" warned Pancrief, whose eyes nevertheless continued traveling leisurely downward, noticing the incongruous white rabbit under her arm, the flat stomach, slim hips, long legs and, indeed, every inch of the vision down to the gold cords that bound her dancing

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sandals to perfect ankles.

"Who is she?" breathed Merek as the girl tossed back her head and laughed —actually laughed—at something a burly escort had said.

"Haven't the faintest. I'd remember that face. Visiting celebrity, perhaps. I'd say a Second Gen because of that scar."

"Scar?" Merek looked again and noticed that a thin red line crossed the girl's left shoulder and breast.

"Let's introduce us," said Pancrief, putting down his empty glass. "Her escort can't take offense. Informality's the password tonight."

Before he could move, the orchestra struck up an old waltz—something called "The Blue Danube." The glorious girl and her partner were swept away by the strains.

"Lot of faces here I don't recognize," said Pancrief two drinks later. "That tall redhead—and that fellow with the teeth and the grin. You don't find many such grins on Pizar."

"He's making quite a hit with the ladies," Merek agreed. "Notice. He's drifting from one to another and whispering to perfect strangers—*oh,* oh! That one slapped him!"

"Party's getting rough," said Pancrief. "I've been to a lot of these balls and I never heard such a racket. Listen."

Merek nodded. There was something here which was out of the ordinary—a rising surge of devil-may-care revelry unusual among the staid Centaurans of this highly civilized age. Most of the women were losing their inhibitions all right.

"Notish anything odd about this liquor?" asked Pancrief.

"It's twisting your tongue. We'd better find partners and dance."

"I dance with nobody but the tall redhead."

"Okay. There she is with the girl who has the scar. They're talking to the orchestra leader."

Merek started pushing his way through the mob. It was tough going. He was only halfway across the floor when the music stopped with a crash of cymbals and roll of drums.

"L-ladies and gentlemen," the pallid bandmaster spoke into his invisible microphone. "Silence please. I have an important announcement." The din decreased a few degrees. "I have been a-asked to tell you that this is a raid. Barbarians are amongst us."

A roar of laughter greeted what was considered by most of the guests to be an unorthodox effort to give them a thrill. There were angry mutterings by some of the men, who consideerd the sally in poor taste, and a note of hysteria in the giggles of the women. Merek, with Pan close behind him, stood frozen.

"No, no—*please!* This is no joke," pleaded the orchestra leader. "A raiding party of five hundred barbarians has infiltrated the hall. I have just been given proof."

[*Turn page*]

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"Nonsense!" Patterson and the governor had mounted part way up the stairs. The former was bellowing at the milling throng through his cupped hands. "Look about you. Do you see anyone faintly resembling a filthy barbarian? This is a bad joke. My men are guarding every entrance and exit of this building." Catching sight of Merek and Pancrief, who now were wedged against the orchestra dais, he thundered, "Officers. Arrest that bandmaster. He's a saboteur."

A man and woman in fautless evening dress ran up the stairs, automatics in hand. The governor and the admiral made belated motions toward their dress swords. Then they lifted their hands, were herded from sight.

"Grab the girl with the scar," yelped Pancrief. "I'll take the redhead. We've got to get them out of here before they get hurt."

HE LUNGED forward as he spoke—and was met by a straight-arm jab that slammed him back against the bandstand so hard his teeth rattled. Before he could recover, the red-head had vanished in the crowd.

His craggy face hard as rock, Merek snatched at the other girl. She eluded him and started wriggling through the press in the direction of the kitchens. With Pancrief cheering him on from behind he gained on his quarry by inches. As the mob thinned somewhat he was almost upon her. Quick as a cat she whirled, winked sardonically—and tossed her pet rabbit into his face!

Merek dodged by reflex action, knocking the flying creature out of his path. He started forward again, then stopped with a yell and began flailing at his trousers.

"What's the matter?" Pancrief shouted as he galloped up.

Merek turned on him a face in which shock struggled with laughter. "The rabbit!" he gulped. "The damned rabbit bit me on the leg!"

They looked around for the girl with the scar. She wasn't there. Behind them the voice of the orchestra leader continued its pleading.

"Nobody will be hurt if he follows directions. Ladies to the south side of the room—gentlemen to the north. That's it. Throw all weapons into the middle of the floor. Naughty!" There was the sound of a shot. "Sorry that had to happen, ladies and gentlemen. That's better. Hold your hands high. *Now* . . ."

Their spines creeping in expectation that bullets would follow them, Merek and his friend plunged through an open diaphragm into the kitchens, dodged various servos which stood awaiting orders that did not come, and located a service exit. Dashing pell mell down flights of seldom-used stairs, they finally reached the gardens surrounding the mansion. There they found merrymakers from the town trampling the flower beds as they tried to get a glimpse of their betters at play.

"I'll alert the guard," panted Pancrief.

"Save your breath," Merek ordered. "If shooting starts here there will be a slaughter. The only thing we can try to do is keep the barbs from getting back to their ships. Head for the Shark."

Using moving sidewalks where they could, sprinting across town where they had to, they succeeded in reaching the port's outskirts.

"Take it easy," whispered Merek. "The place may be surrounded."

But the sentry reported no disturbance. "No, Captain Penn has not returned. A raid?" He stared. "Impossible. Why—"

"Take us to the control tower at once!" Merek cut off his ramblings.

The squad car screamed across the thousand acre field. In the tower they found a frantic C.O. tearing his hair. "Static!" he gabbled at the newcomers. "Static on FM! Can't be. But there it is. I've lost contact with all the cruisers. A raid, you say. Impossible. Why . . ."

They left him dithering, screeched

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across the field once more to where the Shark lay helpless on her cradle, routed out her skeleton crew, then did a bit of dithering themselves.

"Is there any way to get this piece of junk into the air?" Merek yelled at the pajama-clad and blinking Chief Engineer when he and other officers assembled on the bridge.

"Impossible, sir. Her main tubes are down."

"How about her anti-gravs?" Pancrief asked.

"Well—uh—they're only for take-off and landing. I could lift her ten miles or so with them but it's risky. Unless Captain Penn ordered it, sir, I couldn't take the responsibility." He squared his shoulders.

Merek hesitated. Did he have the authority? He saw Pancrief watching him quizzically and drew a long breath. "Captain Penn is either dead or a prisoner," he answered levelly. "I'm in command here. Take her up at once, directly over the port, as high as she'll go."

The engineer, a Pizarian, sized up his new commander. Then he said "Yes sir," saluted briskly and marched out.

"Nice going," said Pancrief out of the corner of his mouth.

"Lieutenant Pancrief will act as my aide," Merek said to the Shark's trio of officers. "We won't be able to move rapidly but we may be able to give a good account of ourselves till help comes. You—" he nodded to the deck lieutenants—"put the fear of High Barbary into the crew.

"You—I'm sorry I don't know your name yet—break out the flasher and try to contact any cruisers nearby. Use the interplanetary transmitter to alert Mercon. Keep sending, whether you get through or not. Lieutenant Pancrief, take over the guns and shoot anything that moves. I'll man the controls, such as they are."

The engine room telltale blinked and Merek signalled for elevation. A viewing screen above the control board brightened, giving them a full view of the night sky lighted faintly by the twin suns of Alpha and Beta Centauri near the southern horizon. The C.O. began tapping out dots and dashes on the blinker key. The radio receiver chattered with static.

SLOWLY, waveringly, the Shark began pushing herself away from the surface of Pizar. Up and up she went until she hovered on invisible stilts ten miles in the stratosphere. As she went up the static diminished to a distant howl.

"Hello the Shark," a worried voice spoke over this background noise. "This is the Tiger. Commander Pleines speaking. Can you hear me? Over."

"The Bream here," came a different voice. "Commander Pritchard. Over."

Merek outlined the situation to the other cruisers. "Any barb ships sighted?" he ended.

"Not a pip on the radar till you came up," Pleines reported. "Nothing but static from the ground. They must have sneaked in low under that. Over."

"Check," said Pritchard.

A faint voice spoke up, ghostly on the darkened bridge. "Commander Pitkin of the Partridge reporting," it said. "We're coming in. I have relayed your information to the other cruisers. They're all heading for Pizar City. Meantime, if Commanders Pleines and Pritchard approve, I suggest that since you know most about what happened downstairs you take command, sir."

The Pizarians were passing the buck again, just as they always did when a Merconian shoulder was handy to lean on. Merek looked at Pancrief, hunched over the gun pointer. His friend lowered one eyelid.

"Very well," he said. "Stand by for orders."

He studied the situation below through the magniscope. A procession of some kind was being moved along Pizar City's main boulevard, heading south toward a group of wooded hills. Scanning its apparent destination, he

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found nothing unusual there—just a small suburb of modernistic cottages, laid out in neat rows on a meadow through which a brook meandered.

Walking the Shark ponderously on its miles-high stilts, he searched an area 20 miles in diameter for evidences of an enemy landing.

"Pancrief," he said at last, "will you take a look at this?"

Pan scanned the plate for long moments, then shook his touseled head. "Same old hick town," he grunted. "Looks just as it did when I was last home on furlough—except for that new suburb. Lord, what will those crazy architects be making people live in next?" He slouched back on his calculator.

Merek studied the procession. It was a long one—long enough, he suspected, to include not only the invading barbarians but every woman who had attended the ball.

He bit his lip. It seemed impossible that whoever was in command down there didn't know that three Centauran ships were watching them. Yet there was no attempt at concealment and complete contempt for the tens of thousands of Pizarians who must be snarling with fury as they lined the streets and watched their womenfolk being marched off.

Well, what could he or they do about it? Neither dared attack for fear of killing the captives.

"Say," exclaimed Pancrief as he stole another glance through the 'scope. The procession had poured off the terminus of the moving way and was now marching across the meadow. "You don't suppose the barbs have decided to *stay* on Pizar, do you?"

"Get back to your post!" yelled Merek. "Here they come!"

Pancrief jabbed commands into the gun sighter as a great globe shot into view out of Alpha's glare. It was coming at such sped that even in the thin stratosphere its metal skin glowed cherry red.

The calculator whirred and clicked. Streaks of radiation flashed simultaneously from the turrets of the three cruisers, setting the air blazing in their wake. The first stabs were wild. Within seconds they steadied and crept in for a bullseye.

But their target didn't oblige! It swerved madly, saw it couldn't escape those questing fingers—and vanished into thin air ten miles to the northwest.

"Got him the first time!" Merek pounded Pancrief on his bony back.

"Got him *nothing!* Didn't come within a mile of him. And they've got a fix on us now. *Move?*"

Merek dropped the Shark a thousand feet, slamming himself and the others hard against the ceiling of the bridge. Even as he did so another cherry red globe whizzed over the horizon, three rays blazing. One missed the dropping Shark and another the zig-zagging Tiger. But the Bream had not moved quickly enough. It exploded as the infra-heat struck it squarely amidships.

Pancrief had been ready for this attack. Two of the Shark's rays grazed the hurtling globe. It vanished as before but one huge white hot melting section of it remained in view. Turning slowly, this fragment followed the dead Bream.

"What in hell's name are those things?" shouted the C.O.

"Barb ships," said Merek through his teeth. "The next one's got our number on it. Hold on!" He managed to cling to his chair as he sent the cruiser zooming to the limit of its anti-gravs.

"Maybe not," panted the C.O. "Here come reinforcements." His screen was suddenly alive with speeding pips.

Nevertheless the globes tried again. The Tiger went down in flaming ruin but the enemy calculators evidently could not grasp the fact that the Shark was operating entirely on anti-gravs and therefore failed to chart her bobbing course. Not only did they miss her consistently but one of their globes was caught in Pancrief's broadside and melted to a puddle.

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The enemy called it quits. No more of them appeared. On points, it seemed a clean-cut victory for the lighter home team. Score—two cruisers against one battleship lost and one damaged.

Eventually Merek found time to look toward the ground once more. "Pan," he said hoarsely. "Come here. I must be going blind."

His friend peered into the plate, then gulped convulsively. "Gone!" he marveled. "That new suburb has plumb disappeared."

"*Suburb!*" Merek was kicking himself mentally. "That was no suburb. That was another barb ship!"

"And while the others were playing tag with us it took off with about five thousand of the prettiest women in the universe," sighed Pancrief. "Too bad. I would have liked to get acquainted with that red-head!"

"But how?" mourned the Merconian. "How could what looked like a group of summer cottages be a ship?"

"We'll find out—if we live long enough," said Pan, lighting a cigarette in defiance of regulations. "Meantime, let's go downstairs, have several stiff drinks and take our punishment." He began whistling the first bars of the ancient ditty, "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight."

III

"GOOD morning, Admiral Mendez." The teller with the blond voice smiled across her desk at the man with five comets on his uniform. "Time for your deposit *already?* Goodness! How the decades fly."

"I'm past due, Mrs. Millston." His body remained taut.

"Oh dear. That *is* unfortunate. There's a penalty for tardiness, you know—a rather stiff one." She consulted her calculator and frowned prettily. "Of course, you *have* accumulated quite a dividend during the past eleven years. We might charge the penalty off against *that.*"

He flinched at her repeated emphasis and began to perspire. "I have an excuse, Miss Milestone."

"Goodness, he *is* in a state," thought the teller. If he had waited another few months it would have been too late.

"My delay is due to The Trouble," he bumbled. "I have been on an official mission to—seeking allies in—" He gulped. "The name of the star stystem evades me just at the moment but I have it in file of course. It was impossible to return earlier. Also . . ."

"Yes, Admiral?" she coaxed as his slabsided face reddened.

"Well, dammit, if you *must* know—my present wife is a bit extravagant. She has run up bills on the strength of those accumulated dividends. If they're wiped out. . ."

"What a pity." The clerk tapped her teeth with the end of a stylus, then brightened. "Do you have an *official* excuse, Admiral?"

"Oh yes. I had forg—I mean, I have it here somewhere." He fished through pockets, finally produced a long envelope and presented it with fingers that shook.

"Well, *now* I'm sure everything can be arranged. I'll speak to the manager." She rose with conscious grace. "Just make yourself comfortable, Admiral. You'll have time for a run-through before the booth is ready."

"Thank you, Miss Midston." He crumpled into a chair and stared straight before him. A run-through? There wasn't much worth remembering. Perhaps the time he had won his fifth comet. That had been—let's see—That had been in 2908 . . . or was it 2909? Some trouble with the Pizarians? The memory eluded him. Why bother? He shook his head, then sat in a kind of trance until Mrs. Minton returned.

"*Every*thing has been arranged, Admiral," she cooed, patting his shoulder. "The Manager says there need be no penalty *this* time." She ushered him through an inner door, sat down at her desk and stared at the wall in her turn.

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"There, but for the grace of God, and the Bank, go I," she murmured with a shrug that was half shudder. Briskly she began punching at her calculator.

An hour later Admiral Mendez came back through the door. He was stiff as a new ramrod now—just as cold and collected.

"My receipt, please, Mrs. Minton," he snapped and added as she handed him the punched plastic card, "I'm sure you're too discreet to remember my maunderings."

"Of course, sir." She was all business. "Your next deposit is due ten years from today. . . That's June twenty-eight, three thousand-twelve." He still refused to unbend so she added a dig. "Don't forget to be prompt. The Bank cannot possibly accept a second excuse."

Chin up, thick shoulders well back, Mendez marched briskly along the broad and winding belt of turf which was Mercon City's main thoroughfare. Spring was in the air.—Alpha Centauri and its companion sun were well up in a sky spangled with lazy clouds but so clear that little Proxima could be seen sparkling near the western horizon.

Meadowlarks from far distant Earth and a host of flying things native to Mercon were singing in trees so densely blossomed that they half-hid the city's neo-Hellenic buildings. Stately men in brief tunics and calm large-eyed women dressed in diaphanous vari-colored robes walked barefoot in and out of the theaters, stores and gracious dwellings, pursued by their forked shadows. Once he even saw a child with its mother—That meant good luck. It was good to be alive and whole again—to have his mind unclogged and receptive once more.

Or was it? The space-dog's steps lagged. He was in for a bad time at the Capitol. He would have to report that his trip had been one long nightmare of frustration.

If only he could have banked *that* particular memory!

BUT Marian would worm every detail out of him even if it took all of this lovely day when he had hoped to go fishing. Then she would tonguelash him in her aloof way until he would wish he were back among the mocking Siriuns. An admiral doesn't know how to cringe but Mendez felt he might soon learn.

Dawdle as he might the ninety broad marble steps eventually loomed ahead. He mounted each one as if it were a scaffold. Yet there was a curious excitement within him. All men felt it when they approached Her Intelligence. A scrap of thousand-year-old poetry drifted through his mind—

"A daughter of the gods,
divinely tall,
And most divinely fair. . .

"A daughter of devils, rather," Mendez snarled as he marched through the shining portals, a resentful martyr.

He passed down a wide corridor, exchanging greetings with a number of notables and entered a vast, simply decorated and softly lighted room. Its walls were lined to the ceiling with plastic-and-glass panels behind which, Mendez thought with a touch of awe, were the memories of Marion's lifetime, waiting to be brought back to consciousness at the flip of a switch. If *he* had his own one hundred deposits available like that, instead of stuck off in the stacks of the bank somewhere, *he* might be able to make good use of them too on occasion!

The mistress of this fantastic library was seated, primly erect in an upholstered chair, near a window overlooking the Capitol gardens. Her high-arched perfectly-manicured feet were crossed on a footstool. Her fine lips were compressed. Yet, despite her evident anger, she managed to be heartbreakingly beautiful with her masses of ash-blond hair bound high in the old Greek way, her silken-lashed blue eyes and her figure. . .

"I trust you bring success with you, Mendez." She interrupted his musings

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with a voice like a 'cello as she held out a slim left hand to be kissed. If his trip had been successful, he knew, she would have offered her right.

"You know I don't," he rasped. "Those Go . . ." He bit his tongue. "Those Siriums won't play!"

"Play, Mendez?"

"You know what I mean. They telepathed that Mercon was done for, washed up and flushed down the drain."

"Old English slang offends me." Somehow, she managed to frown without creasing her perfect forehead.

"Siriuns offend *me*, shoving their slimy thoughts into my brain like—like rusty needles. They hate everyone, including themselves, I believe."

"*Why* won't they cooperate?"

Why, he thought, did this woman have to be so *efficiently* beautiful?

"First," he answered, "because we're an alien race to them. Second, because they have a life span of only twenty or so of our years."

"Did you tell them we would make them almost immortal if they joined us against the barbarians?"

"I did. They said I lied."

"Lied?" She leaned forward to shoot the word at him. He forced himself to look away from the charms displayed by that sudden movement and another line of poetry drifted through his mind—Ancient poetry along with fishing, were the admiral's only hobbies. This quotation had something to do with "the lovely liquefaction of her clothes."

"Yes," he managed to say carefully, "the Siriuns said we lied for two reasons. The first was that, since theirs is a rapidly expanding civilization, we would never dare give them the secret of longevity. If we did we eventually would have to fight not only the hordes of barbarians from Omega, as we are now doing, but would have to guard our rear against overwhelming numbers of Siriuns. They say nobody, even a decadent

[*Turn page*]

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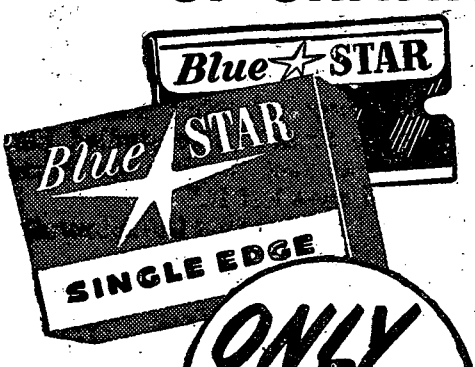

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human, could be that stupid."

"And the second reason?" She was biting her lips now.

"They said we couldn't give them immortality because they wouldn't accept it."

"I don't understand." Her pale heart-shaped face lost its composure.

"Neither do I. They seem to think an extremely long life span saps the vitality of a race and they want none of it. Incidentally that's why they contend we cannot hold out against the barbs."

"Nonsense." She rose and paced the room in a swirl of draperies.

"So I told them. I pointed out that our defenses are impregnable—our numbers overwhelming—our weapons immeasurably superior to Rolph's. I said The Bank supplies us with an almost unlimited fund of knowledge. Well, have you ever tried to reason with a Siriun? If not, don't!"

"Then your trip to Sirius was a complete failure, Mendez?" Her words slashed like little knives.

"I achieved our minimum objective, Intelligence," he replied stiffly. "The Siriuns agree to sell us supplies if . . ."

". . . if we guarantee them one hundred per-cent net profit on every transaction, over and above any loss or damage to their merchant ships. Is that it?"

"How did you know?" He stared at her, deflated.

"I know you!" She resumed her seat. "But do *you* know what the barbarians did yesterday to our impregnable defenses?"

"I—uh—wasn't at the base. What did they do?"

HER eyes snapped fire. "Fishing again, eh? They raided Pizar and stole five thousand of our women."

"The devils!"

"I suspect the women they kidnaped have another word for them," She smiled bitterly. "Have you ever stopped to think, Mendez, what may be the subconscious yearnings of a healthy woman who is permitted to have a child only once a century?"

"Well, no." He actually blushed. "Can't say as I have."

"Do so some time. Then you may understand why the Siriuns think we're —what is it—'flushed down the drain.' But that's not my point. If it hadn't been for the quick thinking of Captain Merek we might have lost the entire planet. And Pizar is too close to Mercon and Arcon for comfort.

"'Merek—*Merek?*" The admiral stared at his manicured finger nails. "But he is a lieutenant, not a captain. What did he do?"

"His commanding officer was attending a ball at the Pizarian capital and got himself scooped up, along with the women. Merek put our ships into the air, caught the raiders on the ground and forced them to retreat."

"Excellent—excellent. Shows you how quickly the Admiralty can issue an order."

"*Captain* Merek didn't wait for an order. He acted on his own initiative."

"*Impossible!*" The admiral grabbed for the radio at his belt. "That's rank insubordination. I'll have the puppy broken for it."

"Will you, Mendez?" The knives were in her voice again.

"Certainly. Orders must go through channels."

"And if they had what would have happened to Pizar?" She studied him languidly, one foot tapping the inlaid floor. "We'd have lost it."

"Are you implying that the Admiralty is inefficient?"

"Not implying!" She sprang to her feet, glorious eyes ablaze. "Admiral Mendez, these are your orders—through channels—the channels of the Council of Mercon. You have two years in which to smash the barbarians—to drive them back to Omega. I don't care how you do it but *do* it! Otherwise you will be relieved from duty and replaced by that 'puppy' Merek—that fiighting puppy who has won Mercon its only real victory

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since the barbarians started infiltrating."

If apoplexy had not been a forgotten disease Mendez would have died from it then and there. Eventually he got himself under control and his color returned to normal. His broad face became canny. "And when I succeed," he said, "what dividend will the Bank pay me?"

"Anything you ask, I presume. What do you want?"

"You!"

"You insolent dog!" The pale roses in her cheeks burned to crimson. "You're already married."

"My marriage occurred ninety years ago. It can be canceled when I make my next deposit. I can wait that long, Marian."

"Well . . ." Some of her anger faded as she studied him coolly. "I might do worse, I guess. The people are becoming a bit concerned about my long celibacy."

"And the records say you were my first wife," he pointed out slyly.

"Yes, I know." She shook her head in puzzlement. "You must have been far different in your youth, Mendez. I can't say that you are my ideal now."

"Ideal!" He snorted. "You talk like a child instead of the second ranking leader of the Centauran Confederacy. "And as for change we've all changed for the better as the result of living a thousand years or so. I've delved into the printed records of my past. Just before leaving for Sirius I even went through the red tape necessary to withdraw and scan my very first Bank deposit in the hope that it would remind me how to deal with primitive peoples."

"And did it?" She regarded him with new interest.

"Of course not. I remembered leading a bayonet charge against the panic-stricken Merconian natives. I was just a lieutenant then, a J. G. at that. Hand to hand combat—buckets of blood—tattered flags flying—yells—screams of agony—*Pfui!* It turned my stomach. Now we fight only at long range with the clean fire of radiation cannon. No dead bodies—no blood—not even any pain. That's real progress, Marian!"

"Is it?" Her face had a haunted look. "Sometimes I think that the Siriuns are right when they call it decadence. Sometimes I feel that we of the Second Generation have progressed so far that we have lost touch with reality, just as we have lost touch with our own pasts. Perhaps the future in this time of change belongs to young uninhibited people like your Captain Merek."

"Young!" Mendez beat his broad chest till it resounded like a drum. "I'm as good a man as I ever was, even though I was born just after the old Centaurus left Earth in 'ninety-nine." As she smiled at him, unconvinced, he changed the painful subject. "How long since you had a husband, Marian?"

"So long that I've forgotten." She passed a hand across her face as though brushing away a cobweb. "My statement says a hundred and thirty years."

"No wonder the people are grumbling. It's time you had another child."

"If the barbarians raid Mercon that may be no problem." She laughed without mirth and turned to the keyboard of her personal calculator to indicate the interview was ended. Over a dimpled shoulder she added, "We'll talk about this again, Mendez—when you return as a conquering hero."

IV

ENERGIZED by Marian's half-promise the admiral did his best. He broke all his fishing poles. He went daily to a gym and lost three inches around the waistline. He barked rather than talked at his subordinates.

Since his fleet was pretty much in tatters as the results of battles with barbarian raiders Mendez moved his headquarters to Pizar, the single planet revolving around Proxima Centauri, where the best shipyards in the system were located. There he laid down the keels of forty battle wagons of latest design.

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He equipped the ships with radiation cannon that could trigger atomic fusion in targets a thousand miles distant. He equipped each gun with the equivalent of an old time proximity fuze so that its beam, which could not be aimed accurately at such a range, would seek out, center on and disintegrate any moving object larger than a meteor. He had to put that limitation on to avoid draining his power packs on the hunks of rock that float endlessly through deep space.

While this work was in progress, the admiral's P. R. O's used their persuasive powers to such good effect that they enlisted thousands of the husbands, brothers and sons of the kidnaped women of Pizar. Women were scarce on that drab planet and their relatives swore they would put up a real fight to get them back. Finally the recruits were put through an intensive course of hypnotic sprouts to train them for the exacting work of manning the new fleet.

All this took time, of course, but Mendez was not molested. It was reported by Intelligence that the barbarians still were licking the wounds administered to them by Merek.

That upstart, incidentally, made Mendez's life miserable with suggestions which were, as any admiral and Second Gen could see, completely impractical. To make things worse the youth had to live within his meager captain's pay because he had never made a deposit and therefore received no dividends from The Bank.

He wore ready-made uniforms that wrinkled around his broad shoulders. He had a shock of sandy hair no issue pomade could conquer. He had big feet that banged the furniture. He had big hands which, Mendez did not realize, were sensitive as a girl's when plotting a chart or nursing a vernier. Moreover he actually read the ancient textbooks on strategy and tactics and had a fixation that guerrilla warfare was not outmoded.

"Great spacetime, captain!" the admiral would bark like an airedale when his nerves wore thin. "Think in terms of parsecs, not paratroops—of astrogation instead of assassination." He longed to break the fool but in view of Marian's remarks he would have to wait for a real slip before doing so.

"Yes sir—sorry sir," was the captain's reply to every rebuke. Then he would salute as smartly as his tight uniform would let him, wedge himself through the door and go back to his quarters on the light cruiser the Old Man had grudgingly assigned to him. There he would study and re-study accounts of guerrilla battles from those of the ancient Tatars to that absolutely impossible barbarian raid on Pizarport.

"I still can't understand it," he said one night to Lieutenant Pancrief, as they sat in semi-isolation, nursing their beers in the Pizarro Cafe. It took more money than they possessed to drink fiery Scopio with the Depositors who thronged the globular revolving bar. "The barbarians sneaked their big clumsy ships through to Pizar without making a pip on a single radar. They crashed the ball, which means that they knew how to dress, act and talk exactly as we do, although we have been led to believe they are a bunch of stinking morons. When we attacked they retreated in perfect order."

"Um." Pancrief resembled an ostrich eternally trying to swallow an orange. "They were scared to stand and fight."

"I'm not so sure. They wanted those women alive."

"They sure pulled a disappearing act," the lieutenant admitted. "No sooner did I get a bead on them than—*poof*—they vanished."

"Well, how in spacetime did they do it? That's what I want to know."

"I figure they went into overdrive." Pancrief signaled for more beer.

"Nonsense. It takes hours to warp into hyperspace. An instantaneous warp would have killed everyone aboard the barb ships."

"Maybe it did." The lieutenant blew away the foam which filled half his

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glass. The Pizarro discouraged the drinking of beer. "We haven't heard a peep out of them since."

"I don't believe that either. It was some sort of guerrilla trick like one I read about where scouts disguised themselves as dead trees. Their enemies were looking for live men so the scouts became 'invisible.'"

"Could be. Rolph the Red is a smart cookie, even if he is a barb. Went to school on Mercon, didn't he?" Pancrief munched at a fistful of pretzels.

"Yes, that was when he was crown prince and we were pals with his father, Rolph the Golden. The prince took a twenty-year college course in four years under hypnosis."

"Nuts. More than a year of unbroken hypnosis will kill anybody."

"Didn't kill young Rolph. He went home, shoved his dad off the throne and started moving in on us."

"That's gratitude for you." The lieutenant was beginning to feel his beers. "Kick us in the teeth after we befriend 'em. Next time, though, we'll knock their dirty teeth out."

SAID Merek, "Don't quote me but I'm not so sure of that." He picked up the check and rose to his feet, knocking over his chair as usual.

The ill-matched friends left the cafe, with its expensive drinks and burnished officers, to plod through the frosty city.

"You know," said the lieutenant as they stopped to light cigarettes under a street lamp, "I can't understand what we've got that the barbs want. All that out there"—he waved a long arm toward the stars—"and they start crowding us."

"There's something beyond the fringe of the galaxy they're afraid of."

"Afraid? Those babies may be dumb but male or female they'll spit in the eye of a twark."

"Yes, because they know how to fight—and tame—a twark. But they're just grownup children. They're superstitiously afraid of the—the unknowable, Rolph once called it."

"You went to school with him, Merek?"

"Well, not exactly *with* him. He existed in my dorm. We used to talk a bit when the hypnos let him up long enough to fill him full of food. I gather things are pretty rugged out on the star cluster. Even in those days Rolph talked about moving his people back into the galaxy—back to Earth, even, until I explained that that was impossible."

"Why don't the barbs ask us to join forces with them against the Whatyoumacallit?"

"Rolph did, I gathered. He made quite a play for Marian at one time—until she told him Mercon's fighting days were over."

"Heh! Heh!" Pancrief ground out his cigarette butt in the light snow underfoot and followed his superior up the ramp to the deck of their shining cigar-shaped cruiser. "Well, happy dreams to you and your gorillas, captain. And good hunting on Omega if the Old Man ever gets us that far."

He watched affectionately as Merek wedged his way down the narrow corridor. Then he turned into his own cubbyhole of a cabin, whistling the tune of the only song he knew.

* * * * *

One year after his arrival on Pizar Admiral Mendez lifted his new fleet for its long flight out of the plane of the galaxy toward the lonely Omega star cluster. There had been ceremonies first, of course—ceremonies replete with gold braid and golden words. The pale Pizarians listened politely as they stood in the wan light of Proxima, their impassive faces cross-hatched by the slanting beams of distant Alpha and her twin.

They applauded Mendez's clichés as he told them that the best defense was an offense, that the sanctity of the home must be preserved. Under the eyes of their Merconian and Arconian officers the new Pizarian crew members tossed

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their white caps into the cold air and cheered lackadaisically as the admiral assured them he was fighting for Centauran supremacy.

Finally it was over. The natives went about their mysterious affairs. Mendez barked at his staff officers. Tritium rockets spluttered as they warmed. Ports screwed shut. When the two-score stately ships blasted out of their cradles and arrowed toward their "rendezvous with destiny" the spaceport was almost deserted.

"My people are not demonstrative," Pancrief half-apologized as he stood with Merek on the bridge of the cruiser Meadowlark.

They had little to do but stand since the autopilot had taken over and was nursing the ship upward at a steady 1G acceleration

"Your people have never forgiven the First Council for ordering them to colonize rocky little Pizar and sending the main body of colonists on to the lush planets of Mercon and Arcon," said Merek.

"It's a good life on Pizar," Pancrief defended. "We don't get rich. Our dividends can't compare with yours. They probably never will, Merek, but still—"

"Still, Pizar's Second Gens nurse a grudge." The captain was studying the dwindling snow-capped planet through a viewport.

"How can they nurse a grudge for a millenium? They've Banked all that."

"I remember reading about a civil war in the United States, Pan. The hatreds it engendered didn't die out for five generations. Isn't the same thing true on Pizar?"

"Well yes, maybe. Second Gens are funny that way. They like to think they remember the good old days. Sometimes I believe they do in a way. There *is* resentment."

"Let's hope it has been hypnoed out of the crews," said the captain. "To be on the safe side I'll order daily drills and rigid inspections."

IN PERFECT formation the fleet went up and out of the gravitational grip of the three Centauran suns. A week after take-off they were sufficiently in the clear to start the slow and painful business of shifting into hyperspace.

At first the raw crews behaved quite decently as the stars winked out, green mist invaded the ships and the muscular twitchings started. Each ship was on its own now for no communication was possible among them. Each captain used his own judgment as to the amount of pain and fright his men could stand. Each, because of the sheer terror of hyperspace, tried to fight through as fast as though demons pursued him.

Two sailors died, gibbering on the decks, the first "day" the Meadowlark spent in that never-never dimension. Six had bone-breaking convulsions the next day. The third was too much. Mutiny broke out in the engine room and worked forward. But the twitching green ghosts who started it were in such agony and bewildered fright that Merek's officers managed to split them up, herd them to their quarters and lock them in with a minimum of bloodshed.

After that the ship took care of herself as best she could with a few assists from sick and overworked officers. The crew's quarters was a shambles of writhing screaming Pizarians. The ship's doctor and his apothecary's mates sweated it out around the clock. Merek and Pancrief toiled unceasingly over the unified field mathematics which alone could bring them out of hyperspace with a ship which did not resemble a flaming pretzel.

On the morning of the sixth day the captain stretched out a trembling claw and pushed home a sort of corkscrew which, he hoped, was the proper quadrant. A mewling caricature of a thing that had to be Pancrief, although it looked like Beelzebub, cut the warp.

Like a pip out of an orange the Meadowlark snapped out of the green hell into a black space bounded by the orange on one side and a limitless, varicolored

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tapestry on the other.

"Made it—once more!" Pancrief husked as he slumped in his chair and mopped his white face.

"Some didn't." Merek counted the silver ships floating in ragged disarray. ". . . thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six. One battle wagon, a cruiser and two destroyers left stuck in the warp."

"Poor devils!" His aide staggered to his feet and leaned his forehead against the cold glass of the viewport. "Fringes of Omega Globular Star Cluster dead ahead, sir," he reported. "Alpha Centauri twenty thousand light years astern. God pity the poor sailors on a run like this."

Cutting in the transmitter, Merek made his report to the admiral.

"Ten men dead, you say?" barked a familiar voice from the flagship Alpha. "Unfortunate—*very* unfortunate." Then "We blast for Rolph's headquarters planet at twenty-three hundred. Here are your orders:" The mechanical voice of the fleet's main calculator cut in with a stream of gibberish that made sense only to the smaller "brain" in the Meadowlark's control center.

"Wish you could have asked the Old Man how many sailors *he* lost," growled Pancrief as his chief joined him at the port. "Lord, what a sight!" he breathed after an interval. "One hundred thousand suns—count 'em—one hundred thousand. And packed thick as strawberries in a crate."

He stared at the flattened orange which was Omega Centauri. It glittered with numberless points of light, each a giant star.

After the magic of that sight lost its appeal they moved to the opposite port to look back over the endless distances they had traversed in less than a week. The concentric rings of stars which made up their home galaxy stretched away and away, like some limitless dream tapestry. They were observing the Milky Way from "outside" now, so distant that the naked eye could not pick out Alpha or any other star-mark.

Between the star cluster on one side and the galaxy on the other there was nothing—nothing but an overwhelming blackness spangled at vast intervals by misty smears that represented immeasurably distant nebulae.

"Lonesome, isn't it?" was the only comment Pancrief could think of. His usual bounce was missing.

There was a rap on the door. Lieutenant (J. G.) Manfred entered and saluted smartly though his uniform was dirty and sweat-stained. "Most of the crew have returned to normal, sir," he said.

"Pipe them to battle stations and give each a double ration of Scopio, lieutenant," Merek replied. "We start moving in at twenty-three hundred."

Manfred saluted again and departed, humming. The chubby little fellow had been transferred from the flagship to the cruiser at Merek's request. The informal atmosphere on the Meadowlark made him feel that he had been rescued from a long stretch in prison with a consequent feeling of relief.

The fleet reformed on schedule and arrowed toward the star cluster. Omega enlarged rapidly but, though the guns were manned continuously, nothing came up to meet the invaders.

"It's not like Rolph," said Merek as he puffed nervously at a cigarette a week later and studied the Cepheid variable star which now winked dead ahead, like a celestial lighthouse. "I can't believe we'll catch him napping."

"Maybe it's a trap," suggested Manfred, who was standing the watch with him.

"Space is too big to do much trapping in. I'm worried, though, that Rolph is out raiding us while we're raiding him."

"I doubt it, sir. Unless his espionage is weaker than we think he knows we're coming by now. And he can't take a chance on losing his base of supplies."

"If he *has* a base in the accepted sense, lieutenant. I have a hunch this war is something your modern textbooks never got around to discussing."

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BY THE time the Cepheid had waxed and waned twice more in its endless, thirteen-hour cycle they were within its planetary system and coming in for a landing on one of its two Earth-type worlds.

Radar screens up, guns swiveling in search of non-existent enemies, the ships decelerated together like one mechanism. Early the next "morning"—that is, before the Cepheid sun was halfway to its maximum brightness—they landed in circle formation on a snow-covered plain rimmed by grim mountains, where a river cataracted a thousand feet into an ice-filled sea.

"Intelligence says this is the site of Rolph's capital," the admiral's puzzled voice came over the communicator. "Looks deserted but keep a sharp lookout. I'm sending out scouts."

As a half-dozen destroyers darted away the crews of the grounded ships stood tensely at their posts, half-expecting that enemy guns would rise from the snow and start blasting. But nothing happened and only the voices of operators aboard the scouts came over the radio. After an hour Mendez called a staff meeting on the bluff overlooking the heaving ocean.

"There's been a slip-up," the admiral growled as he pulled his greatcoat around his ears against the chill wind. "This can't be the place."

"I'm not so sure, sir," Merek ventured. "Notice that crisscross of depressions in the snow. Streets would look that way after a blizzard."

"*Streets!*" But there are no houses in sight."

Merek started kicking into the fresh drifts, which lay about two feet deep. Almost immediately his boot hit an obstruction. He cleared around it, disclosing a stake that had been driven slantwise into the ground.

"Tent peg," he explained. "The barbarians live either in caves or in tent cities. They've decamped."

"Impossible, captain," barked the admiral. "The barbs don't have enough ships to move an entire population. We've landed on the wrong planet somehow."

A destroyer materialized in the leaden sky and flamed in for a landing. Out tumbled a captain, herding two captives before him. One was a powerful middle-aged man with one arm. The other was very evidently a woman. Despite the fact that the thermometer was still below freezing their only clothing consisted of boots, gloves and fur kilts that covered them from navel to midthigh. Both wore their hair in braids and the man had a long reddish-grey beard.

"Are you subjects of Rolph the Red?" Mendez bellowed when the strange pair stood before him, erect and contemptuous. He acted on the assumption that any foreigner could understand English if it were shouted loud enough.

"Nah!" sneered the man.

"Who are you then?"

"Rolph brudder, sister."

"*What?*" Mendez goggled, thinking he had made a haul indeed.

"Aw barb brudder," the fellow enlightened him.

"Brothers, eh?" The admiral covered his chagrin with a frosty smile. "Where then are Rolph and his *fighting* men?" He emphasized the word with deliberate cruelty.

The barbarian took no offense. He stared down at the stump of his arm for a moment, then broke into a slow knowing smile.

"Mind Pizar?" he asked. "Brian," he tapped his hairy chest, "fight dere. Lose arm. Fin' mudder." With his good arm he gave the woman an affectionate whack on her naked back.

The admiral stepped back as if struck. "*You*—a Pizarian?"

"Not any more," the woman answered coolly. "Fact is, I have almost forgotten Pizar. Dreadfully dull hole, isn't it, Admiral Mendez?"

"You'll return home with the fleet, of course."

"No thank you—not unless you put me in irons."

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"You *like* it here—this miserable God-forsaken iceberg? This lout?"

"I *adore* it." She flung her arms wide and breathed deeply. Pancrief whistled softly, being safely out of Mendez's sight.

"How do you keep from freezing, running around half naked?" Mendez demanded.

"How do you keep from suffocating inside that uniform?"

"Enough of your insolence," yelled the outraged admiral. "Where is Rolph?"

"Up there." She pointed to a spot of light in the sky which marked the Cepheid's second planet. "He pulled up stakes here when he heard you were coming. I understand he has arranged a hot reception for you on Midgard. Have fun."

"You treasonable hussy! Get out of my sight before I do put you in irons."

The ex-Pizarian dropped him a curtsey, linked her arm with that of her mate and trudged off across the snow without a backward glance.

"*Well!*" For once Mendez was almost speechless. "We re-embark at once. Attack formation."

V

THEIR cautious flight to Midgard took a full week. Their reward was a parched desert instead of a frigid one. Scouts reported sighting only a few thousand barbarians.

"Decamped again, the fleabitten coward," raged Mendez at another futile staff meeting. "Though how he does it I cannot understand. The only thing to do is to garrison these planets and hunt him down in space."

"Perhaps the emperor has gone to the planetary system of some neighboring star," suggested Rear Admiral Pierce. He would have ranked as a full admiral except for the fact that he had been born on Pizar. "I understand the barbarians control five or six of them."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Do you think it advisable to divide the fleet, sir?" Merek ventured.

"Dismissed!" was the admiral's only reply.

The upshot was that five cruisers were placed temporarily under Merek's command and sent back to their first landing place while another five were left with Pierce at Midgard. A month later the rest of the fleet was caught off-guard in what should have been the empty space between two stars—and all but annihilated!

When disjointed panic-stricken reports of the battle began dribbling in Merek and Pierce raced out to give what help they could. All they found was the Alpha, which the barbarians had pointedly ignored. The rest of the ships were only shining motes of cosmic dust.

"I don't understand—I don't understand," Mendez babbled after the remnant of the fleet had made good its escape via hyperspace and was limping

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homeward through the fringe of the galaxy. "One minute our detectors were quiet as the grave. The next those barb ships were amongst us, so close we couldn't bring our guns to bear without hitting each other. They cut us to ribbons. But the crowning insult was they never fired a shot at the Alpha. Not a shot, sirs—not a shot." He buried his stricken face in his hands.

"It was treachery," shouted Marlborough, captain of the flagship. His face looked like an old hot water bottle, what with sleeplessness and worry. "It was the Pizarians among us. I never trusted the . . ."

"I resent that," snarled Pierce. He thrust out a stubbly jaw and seemed about to leap at the other across the empty table.

"There were no Pizarians on the detectors," Mendez said. "I had seen to it that they couldn't be in a position to—"

"I resent that even more," yelled Pierce. "My countrymen are loyal. And they're fighters—not like you effete Merconians."

"Gentlemen," Merek cut in, "this is no time for bickering. The system's in grave danger."

"The boy's right," said Mendez and then, to show he bore no grudge, "what is your explanation of our—uh—setback, Captain Merek?"

"The barbs came at you out of hyperspace, sir."

"That's impossible. Instantaneous transit would have killed every man aboard their ships.

"How do you know there *were* men aboard? Perhaps they've made common cause with some alien race."

"Those bloody Siriüns," brooded the admiral. "Well"—he took a grip on himself—"what's left of the fleet must proceed immediately to Pizar for refitting. I'll take the Alpha on to Mercon."

THIS time Marian did not extend either hand to be kissed as Mendez fidgeted before her. "A year and a half wasted, Mendez," she purred. "Ten billion dollars wasted. Thirty-eight hundred Merconian lives wasted. You have six months left."

"Six months! Your Intelligence wouldn't hold me to that?"

"I would." Her slender gold-tipped fingers played with a spool of recording tape he had brought—tape which portrayed the fleet's debacle.

"But the morale of my men is shot!"

"More slang, Mendez, or do you mean that literally?"

"Destroyed," he amended. "It will take me months to get them in fighting trim again and train new recruits."

"Recruits?" Those sapphire eyes narrow. "No one will join the fleet while the memory of our defeat is green."

"Conscript them then, confound it."

"Conscription would have to be approved by the people. This is a democracy."

"Then have the Council try to make some sort of compromise with Rolph. He's in trouble out on Omega. Perhaps, if we—invited him to come . . ."

"Compromise—with that rabble?" She forgot her studied calm to leap to her feet and grip his shoulders. "*No!* The pure Centauran blood must never be diluted. We are a super-race. Better extinction than that!"

"There was a time when you thought otherwise," he said softly.

"Oh!" Her face flamed. "You are referring to that gossip about Rolph and me. Be careful, Mendez. You may presume too far."

"There might be another way," he floundered. "That last batch of refugees from Earth—the ones who came here about a century ago. They think like barbarians in many ways. Perhaps, if we asked their advice . . ."

"Mendez, Mendez," she sighed. "Is this the best you have to offer? The refugees are unalterably opposed to war of any kind. Their ancestors saw it destroy Earth. They would tell us to practise passive resistance—against bloodthirsty cannibals."

"Oh, come now," he objected. "The

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barbs stopped eating each other in Rolph the First's time."

"So *they* say." Her mouth set in harsh, unforgiving lines. "And *I* still say you have six months more, Mendez. If there is no victory by that time Rear Admiral Merek will assume command of the fleet."

"Rear Ad—" He tore at his collar. "There may be another line of attack," he managed to say at last.

"Yes?" There was a hint of feline merriment in the word.

"Have the Council change the law regarding Bank deposits. Surely it has the power to do *that* without a referendum. Command all citizens of the Three Planets to deposit recollections of the past six months."

"Go on!" She leaned forward with that liquid motion which set his pulses hammering.

"With memory of the Omega disaster wiped out I can easily recruit more men. Then, when additional ships now being built on Pizar are completed, the fleet will rise like—who was that giant whose strength was renewed every time he was thrown to the ground?"

"Antaeus," she answered promptly. "But as I remember it Hercules finally defeated the giant by strangling him in mid-air. Nevertheless, your idea is a good one. The people murmur. Pizar is in almost open revolt. They will quiet down when their minds are washed clean of the defeat."

"Thank God!" husked Mendez. "Then I will be able to sleep again."

Marian threw back her fine head and laughed until the calculator panels tinkled. "*You!*" she mocked. "The order which the Council issues will not apply to you, to Council members—or to Merek. We must have some continuity, you know."

"But I could *read* about my defeat or study it on the screen," he pleaded, grinding his knuckles together. "I wouldn't have to see those fine ships puffing into nothingness every time I close my eyes. And I wouldn't see that 'I told you so' look on Captain Merek's face."

"Rear Admiral Merek," she corrected. "And don't forget—six months!"

He stomped out of the room without waiting to be dismissed.

In her library, Marian fitted the film she had been toying with onto a spindle, found a spot which showed Merek on the bridge of the Meadowlark and enlarged the three-dimensional image until it filled one end of the room. She studied the rugged face for long moments, lingering over the shock of yellow hair, the broad brow furrowed in concentration over some long-forgotten problem, the firm chin, the bull neck, the full lips with provocative quirks at their corners. He was almost as tall and just as handsome in a different way as . . .

She mastered her unruly thoughts, cut off the projector and sat with folded hands in the semi-darkness. After an interval she sighed deeply.

"Did you call, Intelligence?" asked her secretary through the intercom.

"What? Oh—no, I didn't call." She disconnected the loudspeaker too and continued to sit in the shadows, lost in strange daydreams.

PLENTY of complications but no real hitches developed when the Order in Council was promulgated. For several weeks the thousands of branch Banks in communities on Mercon, Arcon and Pizar were open around the clock as their operatives processed some two billion Centaurans. Depositors dutifully wrote memos to themselves about the most important activities in which they were engaged.

Then they sat in quiet little booths with electrodes clamped to their temples while all knowledge of recent events was transferred from the "punched molecules" of their brain cells to almost identical molecules and circulating mercury columns of the fantastic cybernetic calculator—or rather the endless series of calculators—that constituted the Memory Bank. They left their booths

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suffering from a species of induced amnesia, were presented with the memos they had written, read them—and carried on.

No attempt was made or could be made to wipe out completely mention of the Omega debacle in printed or photographed news records. But records are ghostly substitutes for actual memories since they have comparatively little emotional impact—and few people bother to re-read them once they are outdated.

So the Centaurans awoke as from a nightmare which they could no longer recall. Again there was polite chatter along the green avenues and laughter in the spacious homes and vaulting theaters. Oh yes, they realized vaguely that there had been a battle of some kind and that the barbarians were still a threat. But meantime the sun shone, the larks sang and an endless, placid and almost effortless life was to be lived and cherished above all other things.

Even on restless Pizar Mendez was treated with polite respect as of yore when he came to mend his broken fleet and to preach the glories of a bloodless holy war against High Barbarie.

"Makes you feel a bit sick, doesn't it?" said Merek to Pancrief. The latter, a captain now and elevated to command of the Meadowlark, was supervising the work of grinding hyperspace burn off the ship's sleek hide. "We have the tar whaled out of us. We learn some valuable lessons as a result. Then—presto chango—the Council waves a wand and we're right back where we started. Instead of including seasoned veterans, the new crews will be made up entirely of raw recruits."

"I wouldn't know, sir. I've had my amputation too. Can't say I enjoy the aftereffects, either. Every once in a while it's like going down a stairway with an occasional tread missing—or like using bifocal glasses for the first time. *Ugh!*"

"I'm sorry, Pan," said Merek later, as they sat amidst the top brass, but still not of it, at the slowing turning bar of the Pizarro. "I tried my best to get you and the other officers exempted but the Old Man wouldn't hear of it."

"Hates you, doesn't he?"

"Can't say I blame him with the Council pushing me ahead this way. I wonder why. Most officers don't rate lieutenant commander until they've made at least one regular deposit."

"Two reasons," grinned his friend. "In the first place you have real ability."

"And the second reason?"

"You'll find that one in your mirror!" As the other looked at him blankly he swirled the ice in his long drink and changed the subject. "Of course, these emergency deposits may be a good thing, at that. Everyone seems full of bounce. Just listen to them laughing and talking at the top of their voices. I feel that way too most times. And then, in the middle of the night, I wake up and get to thinking that things must be terribly bad to make the Council resort to such a thing as has been done to us."

"I've told you. . ."

"I know you've *told* me. And I've studied the recordings. But I'm still not completely convinced. Maybe I just can't trust anybody who cuts a hunk out of my life."

"I see." Merek bit his lips. "But it isn't a permanent loss like a regular deposit. You'll get your memories back after the war ends."

"Maybe, *if* the war ends soon. And maybe, if it doesn't, I'll be making more deposits. Say . . ." He gulped his drink and ordered another round. "Do you think the Second Gens feel all the time the way I do now—feel they've lost something precious forever? Is that why the Old Man hates us Non-Depositors? Is that why he only feels at home with fogs?"

"Fogs?"

"Yeah. F-o-g-s. Fine Old Gentlemen of the Second Generation like those he's talking to over there now." He nodded toward the gold braid clotted around Mendez on the opposite side of the bar.

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"You're talking too much," said Merek. "Let's be getting back to the Yard."

They walked home shoulder to shoulder as usual. But something of their old camaraderie was missing, though they tried their best to ignore the fact.

ADMIRAL Mendez had only twenty-one ships at his back when he made a second ringing farewell speech to the Pizarians. Still, it was a formidable array, far stronger than Intelligence guessed the barbarians could put into space.

There was the fifteen-hundred foot Alpha, complete with a new set of teeth. There were ten new battleships, their turrets modified so they could fire point blank at short range with no danger of radiation backlash. Five of these, including his own ship, the Centaur, had been placed under Merek's command. The other battlewagons were under Marlborough. The cruisers and destroyers which had escaped from Omega also had been hastily modified to make them more deadly. An Arconian named Anderson commanded the cruiser flotilla and a Pizarian old timer, Pratt, had been called in to handle the destroyers. Fiery little Pierce was relegated to a desk job in the Navy Yard.

So they went out.

So they negotiated hyperspace. So, as they lay waiting for orders to reform and advance on the star cluster, they were swept by what seemed to be a harmless cloud of small meteors.

And hell popped! Within five minutes of the appearance of the meteors, ship after ship caught fire! Their hulls blazed with scores of points of light. Their radio voices emitted startled squawks of astonishment and alarm.

"Marlborough! Merek! Anderson! Pratt!" The admiral stuck strictly to protocol in calling the roll. "Report!"

"We have struck a barbarian mine field, I think," gobbled Marlborough.

"We've been boarded," said Merek.

"*Boarded*—in deep space? You're crazy!" raged Mendez.

"Yes sir. Over."

"Hull punctured in four places," cut in an hysterical voice, hardly recognizable as that of the usually phlegmatic Anderson. "Losing air rapidly. Getting crew into space-suits. All other cruisers in trouble."

"Same here," came Pratt's muted voice. "Hull melting dozens of places. No time for suits. Goodbye, sir."

A spot of crimson appeared on the wall of the bridge not five feet from where Merek stood. It spread like a boil. The titanium metal began to bulge outward ever so slightly. The Centaur was being hulled.

"Mendez—give me the air," Merek shouted over the babel which filled the ether. "I'm going to try a maneuver which may save us. No time to explain. If it works, follow my example. *Pan-crief*. Come in!"

"Yes sir!" The Meadowlark lay only a few miles from the Centaur but its captain's voice was muffled and faint, showing he had already donned a suit.

"Roll your ship. I'm going to scratch your back. Do the same for mine if you can." He left the switch open as he shouted directions at his pilot and gunnery officers. Slowly the Centaur began to roll on her axis. As she did so, her guns trained on the Meadowlark, which also had started to roll like a flaming pinwheel.

"Barely tap the firing keys!" Merek commanded his gunners. "Two bursts. Sear both her sides. Ready, Pan? Follow suit. Hold tight, everyone. *Fire!*"

Simultaneously lances of purple radiation flashed from both ships. Merek was slammed to port as by a giant hand, missing the deadly red spot by only a foot. Manfred, who had been at the controls, was catapulted from his chair to pile on top of his superior. The big ship bucked like a broncho although only a whiff of radiation had touched it.

The spot began to fade and reports from other parts of the Centaur said similar port side blisters were doing

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likewise. But as Merek and Manfred dragged themselves back to their posts a crimson smudge grew on the starboard wall of the bridge.

Merek saw that the Meadowlark also had been slammed back on her haunches. Half of her was scorched and black from his fire. But the part of her hull presented as she continued to roll still sparkled with a dozen pinpoints of vicious brilliance.

"*Fire!*" Merek ordered as both ships presented their burning flanks as targets. This time he gripped a control panel and braced himself. His fingernails splintered, his feet shot out from under him and he smashed against the wall alongside Manfred. This time the pilot did not rise.

"Pan—you all right?" The teetering hulk outside was all black now and remained visible only because it occluded a part of the galaxy.

"Okay—what's left of us," came the rejoinder. "Centaur sure carries a wallop. I have a broken shoulder, I think. I've got the boys patching and strengthening the hull. What hit us?"

"Tell you later." Merek scanned the heavens and added, "Most of the ships got the idea and are cleansing each other. But a lot of them, including the Alpha, are still burning and out of control. Can you help me spray the flagship."

"Yes sir."

MEREK staggered to the pilot's seat and put the ship about. As he passed the twinkling Alpha to port his gunners gave her the one-two. The Meadowlark seared her from the opposite quarter.

"Admiral Mendez" he called when the maneuver was completed.

There was no answer although he thought he heard an agonized gasp.

"Marlborough?"

"No air," came the dazed reply. "Half of crew suffocated. Patching."

Matter-of-factly, now that the emergency had passed, Anderson made a somewhat similar report. Pratt did not answer.

As Merek kept probing he found that ten ships in all showed signs of life. Eventually Captain Merryman of the Alpha managed to crawl to the mike and report Mendez with a fractured skull and a third of the flagship's crew either suffocated or incapacitated from broken bones and bruises received when she had been seared.

"I propose Merek should take command," said Anderson after the sad roll-call ended. "None of us would be alive except for him. What do you say, Marlborough?"

"At your command, Admiral Merek," came the answer.

"None of the ships are badly damaged but only thirteen have replied," said the new admiral. "I have a hunch the barbarian fleet will be here in full force very shortly. If we try to put crews aboard the death ships we'll have no time to get back into hyper. On the other hand we can't allow those ships to fall into enemy hands. We've got to beam them down. I'll do the dirty work. The rest of you get shipshape. Any objections?"

There were none. After one last call to the drifting ships, many of which still burned fiercely, the Centaur's guns spoke again and again. At each broadside a splendid hulk, perhaps with injured men aboard, flamed into dust.

When it was all over Merek leaned his head against the control board and wept.

Then came the job of shepherding his undermanned cripples back into the relative safety of hyperspace. Technicians had to be shifted from ship to ship to make the maneuver possible. Time flew while Merek searched the heavens anxiously.

The last straw came when, after all the other vessels had melted through the barrier, Pancrief reported the Meadowlark's warper damaged beyond repair by the jolts it had received. Then there were more frantic orders and shuttling

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of lifeboats. At last Merek himself regretfully pressed the trigger which sent his first command to join her dead sisters.

"Thanks for that final blast," a new voice boomed through the Centaur's loudspeaker. "Gave us a chance to get a dead fix on you. You're bracketed. Will you surrender?"

"Go to hell, whoever you are!" Merek did not feel as brave as he sounded. The radar screen showed points of light converging on the Centaur from all points."

"Emperor Rolph the Red of Barbary here."

"Admiral Merek of Centaurus here. My comment still stands."

"I thought you wouldn't give up the ship. All right then. Get your men—and yourself—into the boats and blow her. I'll pick you up. Fair enough?"

Merek hesitated. Tradition said to die fighting. He looked at Pancrief.

"You're a long time dead," said that worthy, who stood beside him on the bridge, nursing his bandaged shoulder. "Live to fight another day. While there's life there's hope. Dead men tell no tales."

"Oh, shut up! Rolph, will you give us an hour to abandon ship?"

"Of course. But don't try a dash for hyper. We'll nail you."

An hour later and a score of miles away the Centaur's lifeboats, with 500 men aboard, bobbed like corks as their ship's pile went up in a final blaze of glory and defiance.

VI

"IT LOOKS like a chunk of honeycomb," marveled Pancrief as the boat in which he, Merek and half a hundred badly battered sailors were jammed edged toward an open pressure hatch of the barbarian flagship. The others already had been picked up by one or another of twenty enemy vessels.

"Or the faceted eye of some monster insect," Merek agreed.

"Stuck together with spit too," sneered his friend as the ship loomed above them. "How they got that crazy hatch open without a blowtorch is beyond me."

The impression of disorderly order, if such a thing were conceivable, was heightened as fur-kilted grinning warriors of both sexes prodded the prisoners out of their boat and herded them down a long corridor to an accompaniment of skirling bagpipes. Segments of the floor were raggedly joined, sometimes with draughty cracks as much as a foot wide between the metal plates. Scratched and dented walls were pierced by portholes that seemed to have no possible use. The ramshackle structure creaked and groaned continuously like a sailing ship at sea.

"And to think that the best Centaurus had is licked to a frazzle by near-brutes riding pieces of junk like this," groaned Pancrief, whose wound was bothering him badly. "To make it worse, half of these savages are girls!"

"Um!" Merek was trying to adjust himself to the fact that there seemed to be absolute equality between the barbarian sexes. "And I didn't see any guns mounted on this ship."

"Only ones I noticed were on a few Centauran merchantmen that Rolph probably bought while he was on Mercon and converted afterward."

"If only we could have had just one crack at these egg crates," sighed Merek.

"Wish I had a shot of Scopio," said the Pizarian with a shiver. "This corridor is almost as cold as space. How do they stand it, prancing around in fur panties?"

A tall girl, wearing a trim grey kilt and a steel helmet with incongruous floppy fur "ears" set rakishly on a tousle of black curls, stopped the procession at a dimly-lighted corridor intersection. "Oo Merek?" she demanded.

A burly captain jerked his thumb at the Merconian. The newcomer looked him up and down with dawning recognition in her laughing eyes. She took in

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his torn uniform, the cut over his eye, the nasty bruise on his cheek. Then she winked at him broadly.

"Ow, Merek. Come talk Brudder Rolph." She snicked a knife out of her jewel-studded belt and prodded him not too ungently ahead of her.

"Ask the Emp to send us a doctor—and some hot toddy," Pancrief called after them. Merek was too flabbergasted to answer. He had caught sight of the long faint scar that crossed the body of his guard from shoulder to hip.

The prisoner entered Rolph's quarters to find the emperor seated on a heap of furs, reading an old-fashioned paper book. He looked up and winked. Of course, the Merconian remembered now, that was the barbarian greeting to friend or worthy foe.

"Hello, Merek," he said, rising and extending his hand, Centauran fashion. "I'd like to say you are looking well but I'm afraid I'd be lying. Sit down. Lie down if you wish. Iskra"— He turned to the girl—"bri'g foo'. 'Ot drink. One of my best warriors," he added as she departed briskly.

"Did that slip of a girl lead the raid on Pizar?" Merek was easing his aching bones to the floor.

"That steel spring of a girl did," chuckled his host. "You'll find out what I mean the first time you try to cross her. She's going to be your warden."

"You *are* looking well, Rolph." Merek studied the bronzed giant whose body tapered like a triangle from incredibly wide shoulders to hips almost as narrow as Iskra's. "Quite a bit older, though," some imp made him add.

"Yes, I'm pushing forty," Rolph answered, stroking his full red beard. "That's almost ancient for Omega. Well, I have three strong sons and a daughter, any one of whom could take my place."

Iskra returned with a golden platter heaped with dripping hunks of roast meat and with three silver-inlaid horns filled with a steaming liquid.

"You'll have to use your fingers," said the barbarian. "There's not a fork on board. As for a napkin . . ." He stepped to the wall, which was draped with priceless—and stolen—Pizarian silks, ripped off a square of the material and presented it with a flourish. "I'll try to do better by you when we get to Asgard. Skoal!"

"*Asgard!*" Merek choked over his drink. "Is that what you call your capital?"

"Why not?" For the first time Rolph seemed nettled. "Good old Terrestial name, isn't it? I found it in a book of Norse legends."

"Oh, yes." Merek felt better as the hot liquor warmed his stomach. "Will you send some of this to my crew, Rolph? They need it rather badly, along with a doctor." As the emperor nodded he added. "I suppose you call this stuff mead too?"

"How did you know?"

"I too am one of those freaks who reads the old books. But the real mead was a kind of beer. This must be a hundred proof."

"Oh, well—if you want to get technical bagpipes are of Celtic origin. But I like bagpipes. They make pleasant music to die to."

ROLPH sat down, presented the platter to his guest, then dipped into the meat with both hands. The girl followed his example. As she munched she studied Merek quizzically. He returned the compliment. She was really something to look at with her creamy skin, turned-up nose and hair so black it seemed blue.

"Did you revive the old Norse mumbo-jumbo recently?" he asked when Iskra's calm scrutiny became embarrassing.

"No, my great granddaddy, Rolph the First started it. I carried on."

"Why, for Peter's sake?"

"Because I, Rolph the First, studied philosophy," the emperor said between bites.

"*You,* Rolph the First? He has been dead a hundred years."

"I am his avatar, naturally."

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"You believe in reincarnation?"

"My people believed in it after I explained it to them. Reincarnation makes them feel superior to you superior Centaurans. You get killed in a war or an accident and you're dead forever. If one of us dies today he knows he will be reborn tomorrow. What chance have you got against us in the long run if you must worry about saving your precious hides at every turn?"

"I see what you mean. But you were saying something about philosophy."

"Oh yes—I studied philosophy. I noticed that every people has a religion which perfectly fits their state of civilization. Until a hundred years or so ago my people out here on the fringe of nowhere had no religion—and no civilization to speak of either. You know our history. We were the last great wave of pioneers to leave Earth for Alpha Centauri along the only route that was not blocked by alien races—and light years.

"You Centaurans had got away while the going was good, just before the first Terrestial blowup. You had had five hundred years to set up your tight little system before we arrived. Even then you were too good to let our ragtag and bobtail move in with you. But you had developed an experimental form of hyperspace drive. You generously consented to let us make the first long distance jump with it.

"*Hah!*" Rolph's white teeth flashed in a mirthless grin. "I've sung the old folksongs. I almost remember what happened. The first stop was Omega, a safe twenty thousand light years away, you Centaurans thought. Ten per-cent of my people got through. Half of those died before they learned how to exist in a star cluster.

"Then, for almost four hundred years, we stagnated and retrogressed while we fought the cold, the twarks, the fees and each other. We went back about as far as man can go and still remain men.

[*Turn page*]

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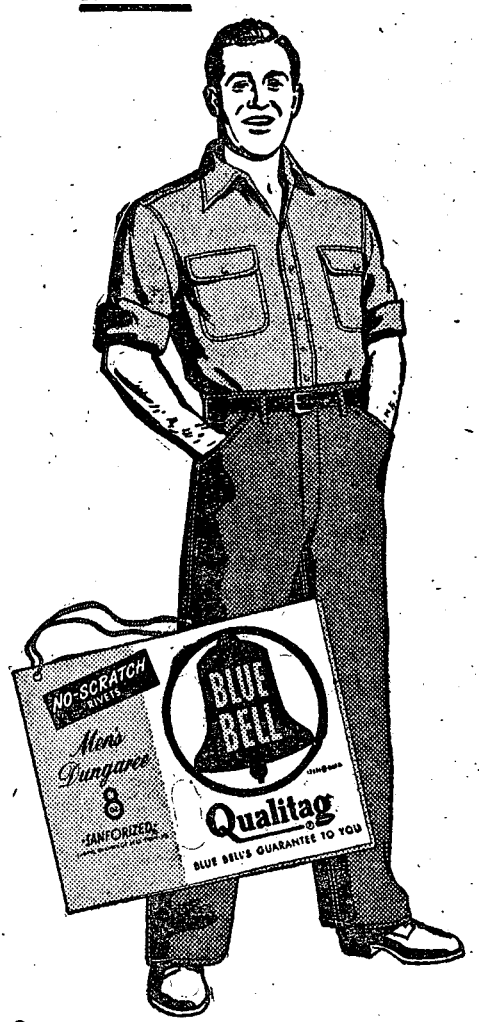

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Cannibalism, you know—human sacrifices—all that.

"About a hundred years ago you folks perfected the hyper-drive and got through to us. A sorry lot you found us. I don't blame you for sending missionaries along with your merchant ships. Still, you were damned fools to do so."

"Why?" Despite his fascination with the story, Merek's eyelids were drooping.

"Because I—incarnated as Rolph the First then, you understand—decided it was time for my people to make their comeback. I—he—pumped your merchants and missionaries for information. He learned to read and write. He studied comparative religions and selected Norse mythology as the one best suited for his people's state of development. By the time he was—uh—translated in battle at the age of twenty-eight he had laid the groundwork for our present high state of civilization."

"High?" Merek was blinking sleepily at Iskra as she licked the grease of the feast off her fingers and wiped both hands on the fur of her kilt.

"It suits *us*." Rolph grinned as he followed the girl's example. "And it doesn't suit *you*. So it must be high. You don't understand us, of course. We're nomads—mechanized nomads, if you will. We hate conventions. We hate sham. We hate cities. We hate conventions. We hate sham. We'd be perfectly content out here on Omega except for something that seems bent on herding us back toward Alpha—but I once told you about that."

"You mean what you called the unknowable."

"Yes." Rolph rose and began pacing the cabin, picking his teeth with the point of his sheathknife. "I tried to tell Marian that we faced a common danger. She couldn't understand either. How is Marian, by the way?"

"Well," Merek answered the meaningless ritual. Centaurans were always well.

"A splendid woman. I thought of making her my empress for a time. But she's too bossy and set in her ways for life out here. Someday someone may break through Marian's thousand-year-old shell of reserve and awaken the real woman in her again. Then you'll have something. In the meantime"—he ruffled Iskra's curls until she purred like a kitten—"I'll put my bets on barbarian lassies like this one."

"Then if you could have made an alliance with Centaurus you wouldn't be attacking us?"

"Of course not. We have nothing against you and you could teach us much. As it is we're in the same position as the ancient barbarians who moved on lordly but decadent Rome because the Tatars were pushing them from the rear."

"But how," mumbled Merek, dimly conscious that he was getting no information of real value, "how do you pull that disappearing act with your ships. And how did you set fire to our fleet?"

Rolph put his hands on his hips and roared with laughter. "The first is a trade secret," he choked when he had recovered his breath. "As for the fires—that 'meteor swarm' was made up of barbarian commandoes wearing space suits and carrying atomic torches. They attached themselves to the hulls of your ships and drilled away until you blasted them."

"Yes, but," Merek's head was nodding despite his heroic efforts, "how did you know where we would emerge from hyper-space? 'S awful big."

"Unified field math, my boy. Knowing how you Centaurans hate to make the transit I figured you'd take the shortest distance between two points in curved space. So I deployed a few thousand commandoes around the spot where you should have emerged—and you obliged. Now, as I was saying . . ."

But Merek wasn't listening. He had slumped sidewise on the befurred couch and was dead to the world.

VII

MEREK awoke, stiff and sore. Wrig-

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gling experimentally, he found that he was stark naked and buried under a pile of furs which smelled to heaven. He sat up, blinked in a semi-darkness split by a triangle of watery light, gasped as the cold bit him and huddled back among the covers.

"Hey there," he shouted.

A figure appeared in the triangle—it must be the open flap of a tent, he reasoned—advanced and bent over him.

"Hi, Merek," said Iskra with a wink.

"Hi yourself. I'm freezing. Where are my clothes?"

"Dere." She indicated a pile on the rush-covered floor, then appraised him blandly as, after a wait which produced no results, he scrambled into his uniform.

"Why was I stripped like that?" he asked to cover his embarrassment.

"Sleep warm nake'." She grinned. "Fur like skin."

"Um. I've read that the Eskimos thought that, too, *Brrr!* I'm freezing, even with my clothes on. How do you barb—how do you people stand it?"

"Barb aw face!" She slapped her bare chest proudly.

"I'll bet." He marveled at the unfrostbitten roundness of her tawny body. "There's more to keeping warm than that, isn't there now, Miss Iskra?"

"Miss? Name Iskra." Hearing his teeth chatter, she relented, dug into a pocket of her kilt and produced two dirty white pellets. "'Ere." She popped one into her mouth and offered him the other. "Eat. Get warm."

He followed her directions. Soon a generous warm stole through his body. Some refinement of benzedrene, he rationalized, amazed that the barbarians knew something about modern drugs. What a godsend for an army on the march! His body heat increased until it became almost uncomfortable. He removed his coat.

"Hung'?" asked the girl.

"Well, I most certainly could consume nourishment of some kind," he grinned.

"W'y Merek use many word?" she puzzled, running her fingers through her crisp curls. "W'y no jus' say 'Yah?'."

"You must hail from Sparta," he chuckled as he followed her out of the round leather-walled tent. "Wasn't it the Laconians who never used ten words when one would do?"

"Iskra no know. Good idee."

Merek dropped the argument to stare at the barbarian encampment. Round tents made of some mottled hairless skin stretched in reasonably well-ordered rows along the brow of what was evidently the same bluff where Mendez's fleet had landed so long ago. Now the place was humming with activity. Before each of the endless hundreds of tents a group of barbarians squatted around a small stove of some sort, either cooking or eating breakfast.

He noticed that each block of tents was surmounted by a tall pole from which fluttered the furry tails of animals. Looking more closely he saw that every pole sported the tail of a different animal and that the kilts of the warriors were made from pelts of the fur from their tribal totem. On a hunch he pointed at Iskra's scanty garment and asked, "Rabbit?"

"Yah." She looked pleased. "Iskra belo'g Rabbit Clan."

"Then you can't be much of a warrior," he couldn't resist teasing. "Rabbits don't fight where I come from." He suppressed a memory of that scar on his calf.

"Omega rabbit fight—or die." She was frowning now. "Iskra show."

"Ouch!" Her slim fingers bit into his arm like a vise as she started leading him toward the nearest breakfasters, who also wore the grey fur.

They ate with twenty laconic warriors who, Merek surmised, made up Rolph's personal bodyguard. The emperor's tent, larger than the rest and highly "decorated" with broken weapons, grinning skulls and other grisly trophies of battle, stood nearby, its back to the lonely

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sea. Many of the guard bore their own battle trophies on their bodies.

When they had finished wolfing their meat and had washed it down with a drink called 'cof' which had not even a bowing acquaintance with coffee, Iskra dropped a bombshell.

"Foo' Merek say rabbit no fight," she announced. "Iskra now show." She picked two swords out of a nearby pile, tossed one toward the Centauran and made the other sing about her head.

"Now, look here," Merek protested, "Centaurans don't fight women."

"Better run fas' den," guffawed a one-eyed veteran, who resembled pictures Merek had seen of the Norse god Odin, as he helped several others clear a space in the snow.

"But I was only joking!" Merek got his guard up just in time as the Amazon made a long spring at him, evidently in some ritual imitation of a rabbit's leap.

"Very well!" Cold anger surged up in him as her second cut almost parted his hair. "I'll teach you a lesson even if I am stiff as a board. You're up against one of the best fencers on Mercon, young lady!"

NOW fencing is an exact science. If Merek had been allowed to use his skill at it he might soon have disarmed his lighter and shorter-armed opponent. The only trouble was that Iskra didn't fence. She came at him like the wild woman she was, using the edge of her sword instead of the point, slashing and chopping like a butcher at the block. Her guard was wide open—yet when he thrust shrewdly she was never there.

"No let Iskra kill Merek, brudder," she husked at the guards through set teeth. "Rolph say no."

Immediately she forgot her own orders and did her best to slice her opponent in two. As she fought she began to lose not only her undoubted beauty but her femininity and, almost, her resemblance to a human being. Her lips drew back from strong white teeth. Froth appeared at the corners of her mouth. Her slitted eyes gleamed red. Her curls turned wet and lank. Sweat bathed her body until it looked oiled and actually steamed in the cold wind. She became the unsexed steel spring of destruction Rolph had hinted at.

"Great star!" thought Merek. "She's gone berserk."

Despite a certain clumsiness Merek fought well. He kept in the center of the yelling mob which now ringed the circle in the snow. He turned this way and that to meet her mad lunges.

Iskra was singing now—a panting, haunting chant which awoke a savage ancestral echo in some part of the Centauran's soul:

"Outta duh blackness,
Into duh starshine,
Fearless an' daring,
Come we, Rolph brudder . . ."

The onlookers, who now included scores from nearby tent blocks, joined with her in roaring out the chorus:

"Forwar' to vict'ry!
Kill aw Centauran!
Steal dere fair women!
Burn dere tall city!"

The chant continued to unwind but Merek had no time to listen. He was fighting for life. The heavy breakfast was slowing him down. So were the muscle strains of his recent battle. He kept to the defensive but made harder and harder going of it. Before five endless minutes passed he was bleeding from a number of light cuts.

Iskra realized her advantage and bored in. Despite his best efforts she drove him to the edge of the circle. The onlookers didn't budge and their jostling bodies interfered with his sword arm. The girl moved in for the kill.

"*Stop!*" Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Rolph emerged from his tent.

"*Iskra!* Rolph say stop!" He shouldered his way through the mob, hurling warriors right and left.

The berserker paid no heed. As Merek slipped on the treacherous footing and went to one knee she swung her sword with both hands for a blow which

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would split his skull.

The emperor went through the ring like a mad bull. Just managing to grab her wrists, he twisted cruelly. The sword flew in one direction, Iskra in another. She lay gasping, all the air knocked out of her.

As the guards backed away from his deadly anger Rolph sat down on a snow hummock, grabbed the girl by the scruff of the neck and turned her over his knee. Ripping off her jewelled belt, he applied it with a right good will where it would do the most good.

She tried to bite him. He tangled his fingers in her hair and continued the punishment. Gradually her struggles subsided but not even a groan came through her clenched teeth.

At last the emperor rose, letting Iskra slide face downward into the snow. He doubled up her belt and tossed it toward his tent.

"Iskra through," he snarled. "Iskra be mudder now. Sew—'ave babe."

That brought a response, all right. She scrambled to her bare knees and wrapped her arms around her lord's legs. Her companions growled but made no move.

"Oh no," she pleaded. "Iskra goo' warrior—fi', ten year mo'. No make mudder. Please, Brudder Rolph!" Her face streaked with tears.

"Iskra no obey. Go berserk. Try kill. Rolph no trust."

"No. No. Jus' game. No kill." But she hung her head.

"Don't be too hard on her, Rolph," Merek interposed, his anger forgotten at this display of abject terror before a punishment he could not understand. "It's really my fault. I made fun of her totem. And she did tell the others not to let her kill me."

"I hate to lose her." The emperor chewed at his brick red moustache. "But I can't have warriors going berserk when not in battle. Don't want you killed either—not till they send your ransom, anyway. I'll get you another warden."

"Oh, she'll behave now. Besides, I want to learn how she uses a sword like that."

"If you say so, old friend." The red giant winked, then yanked the girl to her feet and thrust his hairy face into hers.

"Iskra goo'?" he snarled. "Iskra obey?"

"Yah, Brudder Rolph." Despite heroic efforts she began to sniffle.

"Next' ti'. . ." He crooked his neck, stuck out his tongue and gave a realistic imitation of a man on a gibbet. "Go get belt!" As she crept away he added sweetly to the shuffling guards: "Fee 'ave big feast if Merek hurt!"

A WARY intimacy grew up between Merek and his warden as the result of their battle. She treated him as if he were made of delicate glass. She allowed him the freedom of the camp. And from time to time she let slip bits of information which he could never obtain during his drinking bouts with the emperor.

At first he treated her like an overgrown child, on the theory that her primitive speech indicated an equally primitive mind. That was until he made an astounding discovery.

It came about in this ridiculous fashion—water for baths was at a premium in camp. As a result everybody itched. It was common courtesy, when seeing a neighbor suffering, to scratch his or her back. When Merek did this for Iskra or any of the other barbarians, they would frown and wriggle until he finally located the right spot. But, it gradually dawned, when they scratched *him*—or each other—they found the itch instantly and unerringly.

From this came the eventual realization that the barbarians employed some crude form of telepathy to express any but the simplest thoughts. That is, they used their few words to focus attention and then went on from there. They used words as sparkplugs which set off "explosions" of telepathic thought. And they showed justifiable annoyance when

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Merek insisted on babbling concepts at them which they had complete in their minds as soon as he had spoken three words.

Pancrief confirmed this theory when Merek visited Asgard's small but surprisingly well-equipped tent hospital.

"Now that you speak of it," the thin man said thoughtfully, "the nurse always shows up just before I get ready to call her. Psychologists have a theory that animals communicate in some such fashion but that men lost the art when they developed vocal speech. Probably telepathy had survival value in this god-forsaken cluster and resulted in a mutation."

"But in that case why is their vocal speech so horribly primitive."

"I'm not so sure it is," came the surprising answer. "It's just stripped down to the running gears like ancient Chinese. No grammar—no case endings—no pronouns—no tenses—and amazingly expressive. Maybe it's the language of the future, Merek." Pancrief sipped a horn of milk which stood at the bedside while he let this sink in. "Remember, our language hasn't changed in a millenium."

"But that would put the barbarians on a higher mental plane than us," Merek protested as he tried to plump up his friend's hard pillow.

"Never let Marian hear you say that. Besides, if you rate the barbarians above us just because they're somewhat telepathic you'll have to put Siriuns up there too. They really do the job right. Even we can hear them when they think."

"Ugh. Those slimy creatures. What an idea!"

"Think we'll get out of this?" Pancrief wriggled into a more comfortable position.

"If our ransom comes before Rolph starts moving in, so he can send us home under a flag of truce. If he takes us with the battleships it may be different. I still doubt that he will be able to make a landing on Mercon."

"Providing he lands on Mercon," yawned Pancrief. "Did it ever occur to you that he may strike at Pizar, Arcon or even Beacon?"

"Pizar and Arcon are well protected. As for Beacon, it's only a chunk of barren rock. Nothing could live on it when it makes the transit between suns."

"Betcha these brutes could. And I'll also bet Rolph does have some more tricks. Have you seen his ships about or any signs of a spaceport?"

"Come to think of it, no port big enough for battleships. When I asked Iskra about it she just waved a hand at the sky."

"There you have it. I suspect he drugged the first meal we had after our capture, by the way. All of us slept three days. None of the fellows woke up in time to see us land or to see what became of Rolph's ships."

Merek left the hospital in a thoughtful mood. And the evasive answers he received when he tried to question Iskra didn't help his state of mind. Try as he would he could get no inkling of Rolph's plan of attack.

He got farther when he worked up courage to ask the girl about the punishment with which Rolph had threatened her after their sword battle. They fenced daily now but the Amazon kept a tight rein on herself. About the only thing the contests did was to make Merek lose much of his clumsiness and get into better physical condition than ever before.

"On Omega ever'thi'g fight," she explained. "Twark fight. Fee fight. Man, girl fight. Rabbit fight—or die quick. Only mudder no fight."

"Yes," he fumbled, trying to put the question in such a way as not to offend, "but if the women fight, how do they find time to bear all the children I see scampering around?"

"Woman no fight. *Girl* fight."

"I don't get you."

"True long ti'," she struggled, blushing warmly. "Girl no 'ave babe till slow up—no goo' fo' fight."

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"You mean mutation has made you a sort of female eunuch?" He recoiled.

"No!" Her eyes flashed. "Girl make love mebbe, yah. 'Ave babe, no!"

"I see." He wished he could read her thoughts the way she evidently read his. "And then, when a girl's reflexes start slowing down around thirty or so, she gets married and has a family. Right?"

"Married?" He could almost feel her probing his mind. "Family?" Suddenly she seemed to understand. "Yah. Like so." She pointed to a buxom wench who was trudging through the tent rows, a baby strapped to her back, papoose-fashion, and three older children tagging at her heels.

"But don't girls miss the excitement after they settle down?"

"No mo' girl. *Woman*," she corrected. "'Appy make 'ome wit man. Tame fee—watch twark—build cell. Ver' busy. Ver' proud be mudder."

"What's a cell?"

HER black eyes, usually so direct, shifted evasively. "Merek want 'unt fee?"

"Sure. But first tell me what is a cell and *then* what in blazes is a fee."

"Big fee 'unt tomorrow," she ploughed on. "Rolph say go. Merek feel stro'g now, no?"

"I feel strong now, yes," he gave it up. "When do we start?"

"Firs' 'our."

He calculated. The planet Asgard presented one face to its Cepheid sun at all times. During the five hours when that sun threw its minimum light—only about a twentieth as much as when at apogee—temperatures dropped below zero and became too cold for even the barbarians to be about much. That was when they retreated into their thick tents to carouse or sleep . . . and they seemed to require very little sleep.

The First Hour really came three hours later after the Cepheid had hit its minimum brilliance and was building up for another "day." At that time the temperature rose above zero and the nightly snowstorm ceased.

From then on the camp was a beehive of activity for the eight halfway comfortable hours. By the Fourth Hour the snow was all gone, the sparse vegetation was growing madly and the old-fashioned fahrenheit thermometers stood around sixty degrees under a sun which blazed with white scorching heat.

As the next four hours passed the temperature dropped slowly back toward zero. By the Ninth Hour both animals and vegetables had retreated into caves, tents or under the ground to withstand the frost and the blizzards.

The dim sun was casting blood-red glints on the snowdrifts the next morning when Merek forced himself to leave his warm furs. Even with the help of Iskra's drug and a portable atomic hotplate, which was the tent's only heating facility, he could not keep his stomach muscles from contracting painfully as he dressed.

Outside, he found several hundred warriors assembled, beating their bare arms against their naked chests when not consuming beakers of 'cof' and endless platters of stew. At some unheard command, they marched off to an open space just beyond the tent city. Squatting haphazardly on the plain were what looked like dozens of metal packing cases of weird shape and varying size. Cheery electric lights blazed from their round windows and the doors that opened to admit squads of warriors. After they were loaded, each crate rose and flew westward.

Merek blinked around his strange conveyance after he, Iskra and eight other braves had wedged themselves into it. It was a box, nothing more, which obviously was used as living quarters by the pilot, his sleepy-eyed "mudder" and three grubby children. There was a control panel near the forward window. In the rear was a mass of apparatus that made no sense to the Centauran. As nearly as he could make out, it looked like a disconnected part of some larger

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machine. A light began to dawn in his mind.

"Cell?" he asked his warden.

"Yah?"

"And thousands of cells are joined together to make up one of Rolph's round space-ships?"

"Merek smart." She winked, then peered out of a porthole as a sign that no more questions would be welcome.

With the wind screaming around its corners like a banshee the cell sped across the ghostly countryside at a height of several hundred feet and a speed of something like two hundred miles an hour.

"Las' 'unt?" the bearded one-eyed warrior, who looked like Odin, asked.

"'Ope so," Iskra replied. "Ti' gittin' short."

"*It* come back."

"*It* alway' come back." She spat on the dirty floor. "More bad each ti'."

One-eye shuddered, poured a stiff drink of mead into himself, sat down against a wall, spread out his long legs and snored.

"What is *It?*" Merek wanted to know.

"No can tell Merek wit' word. Bad."

The pilot began swearing at the top of his lungs, interrupting their conversation. Merek gathered that they had run into a head-wind. The crate bucked, wabbled and slowed down to a crawl.

"Get late," groaned Iskra. "Fee wake."

They landed at last in wild hilly country. Other cells followed them to form a circle several miles in diameter. The warriors took weapons from a rack and sallied out. The light was much stronger already and the temperature just below freezing.

"Stay wit' warrior," the girl told her prisoner. "Keep low. Shoot w'en Iskra shoot."

The ten spread out and began creeping toward the center of the circle. No orders were given. A prickling along his spine told Merek the barbarians had established a rapport and were working as a unit. "Odin" inched ahead of the rest, some sort of grenade in hand, toward a cave in the rocks.

"What—" the Centauran began.

ISKRA clapped a hand over his mouth. "Twark nes'. Fee live dere too," she whispered in his ear. "Suck blood you'g sick twark. Go 'way w'en sun warm. Mus' catch now."

Odin hurled his bomb into the cave. There was a muffled explosion. Bellowings and stampings within shook the ground. A triangular head, larger than that of an elephant and cloven with a triple row of yellowish teeth, appeared for an instant at the opening. Merek's finger tightened on the trigger.

"No! Twark goo'!" Iskra grabbed his arm. "Wait."

A creature, so monstrous that the very sight of it made the Centauran quail, crawled out of the cave. It had a head like a prehistoric saber-toothed tiger except that a dozen backward-turning fangs instead of two protruded from its jaw. Behind these and hanging below them vibrated a mass of palps and mandibles. It had a hard bulbous laterally-compressed yellow body, covered with sparse long hairs.

The creature gathered its six abnormally long hairy legs under it and tried to make its escape. It did manage to bound six feet into the air but it had been so badly gassed that when it landed it fell on its back and lay waving those awful legs while its mandibles champed and slavered.

Ten guns spoke in unison. Merek expected the horror to be torn to bits by explosive bullets. Instead it lay seemingly unharmed, although all movement ceased.

Another and another nightmare—a baker's dozen of them—scrambled out of the hole to be paralyzed by barbarian fire. When no more emerged the attackers ran forward and bound the legs of the fees with leather thongs. Merek lost his breakfast while engaged in the task.

In the next two hours they found and

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attacked four more caves and raised their bag to about three dozen. By this time the sun had grown quite bright and the temperature was well above freezing. So it was that when they approached their sixth hole in the cliffs out popped a dozen of the creatures before a bomb could be thrown. These made no move to escape but hurled themselves at the humans in fantastic twenty-foot leaps.

"We warm bloo'. Fee like," Iskra explained cheerfully before she dived behind a rock and pumped her gun empty at the things.

The paralysis charges slowed up the attack but could not quite stop it. If each fee had picked a different enemy the barbarians would have been in a bad way indeed. Instead they converged on "Odin," who had been a little slow in taking cover. They swarmed over the screaming man, slashing with their palps and sucking at his blood with a sound like pigs in a trough.

That gave the other warriors a chance to concentrate their fire. The paralysis pellets finally accomplished their work. The fees stopped their feeding, rolled over, kicked their legs a few times and were still.

"One-eye too ol', slow." Iskra looked at the bloodless husk of "Odin" after she and Merek had finished helping the others bind the fees.

"Aren't you sorry he was killed?" Merek was appalled.

"Why?" She was genuinely puzzled. "One-eye born 'gain soon. Grow stro'g. 'Ave two eye. Be warrior, few year."

"Don't you folks have any sort of Valhalla, where warriors killed in battle go to enjoy wine, women and song for awhile?"

"Valhall'?" She looked at him with a trace of pity. "Valhall' barb name fo' Mercon."

"You're damned sure of yourselves, aren't you?" His face flushed.

She shrugged and joined her companions in piling a cairn of stones over the dead man. The day was now too warm to risk disturbing any more fees. They dragged their inert captives to a central spot and lounged in the sun until cells dropped out of the sky to pick them up.

VIII

THERE was a combined hunt supper and wake at Asgard that night. Several hundred fees had been captured—for what purpose Merek could not conceive—and six barbarians had lost their lives. The emperor—his eldest son, a handsome thoughtful nineteen-year-old just returned from some mysterious journey—Merek—Iskra and half a dozen tribal chiefs consumed prodigious quantities of food served by Rolph's two handsome mudders and his three younger children. Afterward they got down to the serious business of drinking long drinks and telling tall tales.

Piecing the stories together Merek for the first time gained an idea of life on Asgard and the half a dozen other planets circling around the Cepheid and two nearby suns.

There were, he gathered, ten thousand or so semi-isolated communities such as the tent city. Each had its own king, was independent as far as domestic affairs went, but paid fealty to Rolph when foreign policy was in question. Only a fraction of the five million or so barbarians lived in cities, however.

The rest were broken into small tribes or family clans. Some of these herded twarks, the giant, half-tame saurians whose meat provided the chief food staple. Others fished, hunted and did what farming was possible on planets that usually were either too hot or too cold for comfort.

A comparative few were miners, metal workers and technicians. The latter had an adequate knowledge of atomic and space-warp engineering which they had managed to pick from the brains of visiting Centaurans. On the whole, however, they scoffed at complicated machinery. Like trolls or gnomes of

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old they built spaceship cells in isolated cave workshops but flatly refused to construct the roads, docks, libraries, schools, homes and amusement centers that formed the backbone of Centauran civilization.

As for weapons they made light fusion bombs, paralysis guns and rifles and sidearms using explosive charges—for dum-dum bullets. They had also learned to operate Centauran ships and radiation cannon. But for real satisfying carnage they preferred swords, daggers and garrotes.

As one battle-scarred chief put it, after her fifth horn of mead, "Get und' enemy guard! That barb way. Lo'g range, Centauran use big gun. Boom! Boom! Barb. die quick. Sho't range, Centauran, Siriun, no like col' steel. Turn—run—snick!" She made a too-expressive gesture.

"What do you people know about Siriuns?" Merek marvelled. "They're half a galaxy away from here?"

"Too much," said Rolph, frowning at the talkative one. "There *is* something about a sword," he continued. "Perhaps it's a Freudian symbol of some kind. Virile primitive peoples have won most of their victories with cold steel. Decadent races have a horror of it. Athens, Rome, Byzantium, Alexandria—they were all put to the sword even though it is the most inefficient of all weapons."

"Yes," Merek agreed, "and it was a desperate bayonet charge that enabled my people to capture New Chicago Airport from the Oligarchs long enough to get ships and take off for Centaurus a millenium ago."

"How many of you Centaurans would be willing to fight hand to hand now?"

"Uh—" Merek changed the painful subject by saying, "As I understand it, Rolph, your method of governing Barbary is something like that used by the Iroquois Indian Federation of seventeenth century North America."

"Something like that, you antiquarian. Wasn't it George Washington who called the Iroquois 'the Romans of the New World?' " Rolph was showing off. "Well, we barbarians are the Iroquois of the Star Cluster. We conduct our lives as we please until there's fighting to be done. Then we accept iron discipline."

"And you maintain that discipline by telepathic orders?"

"After a fashion." The Emperor poured another horn of mead all 'round. Iskra, who had been unusually quiet all evening, seized hers and drank it at a gulp.

"That means that barbarians are dangerous enemies," said Merek, speaking to Rolph but watching the girl curiously. She seemed to be drinking heavily without getting a lift. "But what if, just once, we manage to hit you?"

"If we can manage to hang on here we'll attack again when you weaken."

"Why are you so sure we Centaurans will crumble?"

"Any civilization that doesn't expand—that which concentrates on maintaining the status quo, as yours does—is bound to fall sooner or later. If it weren't for this Thing out here I wouldn't risk the life of a single one of my brothers in an attack. I'd just wait a few generations for you to fall into my lap.

"I've seen no spectacular menace."

"You will any time now. It seems bent on herding us back toward Alpha. Whenever we stay quiet a while it gives us a jolt."

"Why don't you fight it?"

"Because my people are still mental children in many ways. They went a long way down the scale. It did things to them in addition to making them telepathic. When they can see an enemy they joyfully fight him to the death. But the Thing can't be seen—only felt and heard. And it preys on the mind." He shook himself like a mastiff. "Let's talk of something pleasant. Have another drink and I'll get Iskra to tell you about the time she made a one-girl raid on an Arconian pleasure palace and—"

"Iskra no wanna," said the girl cross-

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ly. "Iskra col'." She shivered violently, a thing which Merek had seen no barbarian do before.

ROLPH glanced sharply at his favorite, then at the hot plate. Its usual white hot filament had turned to a dull red. The emperor leaped to his feet, seized a fur rug from the floor, wrapped it about the girl's quaking shoulders.

"*Go!*" he yelled at his guests. "Thing come! Get brudder in tent. *Quick!*" As they scrambled upright, he added, "Iskra—Merek. Stay 'ere!"

"*No!*" Iskra jerked loose from his detaining hand and stumbled toward the tent flap. "Iskra 'elp."

"I'll go with her," said Merek. "She looks sick."

"She *is* sick. She's unusually sensitive to a psychological attack. If she keels over get her inside quick." Rolph pushed them through the flap, paused to zip it closed on his petrified mudders and children, then raced down the dim street with the others. They fanned out through the maze of tents, shouting warnings which were snatched away by a wind of hurricane proportions.

Iskra attempted to follow the example set by her comrades but her movements were slow and clumsy. Hardly had she run a dozen steps when she stumbled and fell headlong. The fur whipped from her bare shoulders and disappeared into the wrack.

Merek picked her up like a child—a steel spring can be quite light, he discovered—then looked around for his tent. Sighting its dim outline when a shift in the wind deflected the almost solid sheet of snow for a moment, he fought doggedly toward it, in danger of losing his way at every step.

Before he reached shelter the cold had deepened to a degree he had never experienced before. Twenty-five below and dropping several degrees a minute, he estimated, as he fought the zippered flap with stiffening fingers. It opened at last. He thrust the unconscious girl inside, followed her in a rush of blind terror and managed to seal the door behind him.

The cold within the padded walls was almost as overpowering as that in the open. He fumbled about until he found the hotplate switch. Nothing happened. Pressing his numbed fingers against the filament he could feel only a trace of warmth. He located a flashlight but it too refused to work. In the search he came across something even more useful—a canteen full of mead.

Stripping the girl of her ice-caked boots, kilt, mittens and helmet, he massaged her with the fiery stuff until she moaned and protested feebly. Then he buried her under all the furs he could locate.

The exercise had served to keep him halfway warm but when he relaxed the cold bit into him with the ferocity of a fee. He felt in his pocket for warmth tablets and swallowed three at a gulp. They helped but only a little and the pounding of his heart warned him not to increase the dose. At the same time he began to choke as though breathing frozen coal dust. He would be dead or hopelessly frostbitten before the night was out. There was nothing for it—he dived under the furs with Iskra.

She revived after he had forced a tablet between her teeth, clung to him in a frenzy, and wailed like an infant.

"Iskra. Iskra, honey," he pleaded, stroking her curls. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Just a bad blizzard."

"No blizzard!" she chattered. "All thi'g stop. Heat, light, 'lectricity . . . "Merek 'ear win'?" He uncovered his head for a moment and listened. The night had become silent as the grave, the cold grew more intense momentarily and the blackness was like a pall. He ducked under in a panic.

Iskra's lips moved against his ear.

"Talk louder," he told her. "I can't hear you."

"Iskra shout!" The words sounded faint and far. "Brudder die outside. No can 'ear Rolph thought. Go craz'. Lissen!"

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"Listen to what?" he shouted, feeling that somehow he must keep her talking.

"Thing speak. Say 'Ooo—ooo. Iskra die, nevuh live 'gain.' Say: 'Ooo—oooo. Fee get loose. Suck bloo' aw brudder.' Merek no hear? Say 'Ha—ha—ha. Stay Omega, aw barb die quick.' Say, . . ."

"Shut up, you little fool!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her teeth must have rattled. "You're imagining it all. I don't hear a thing. And I won't let it get you, anyway. Try to relax, child."

She snuggled her wet face against his chest and sobbed uncontrollably. He comforted her in every way he knew how. Finally she slept, cuddled up for protection against a cold which stabbed at them like knives.

IT WAS the Third Hour before the cold and dark lifted sufficiently to let them leave their shelter. They found a camp which looked partially sacked. Many of the tents, including Rolph's, had been flattened or blown away. Corpses of hundreds of barbarians, who had been caught in or forced into the open, sprawled in the gutters, stiff and white as statues.

Veteran warriors stumbled about in a daze. Others, eyes staring and lips frothing, were being dragged to the hospital by luckier comrades. From the quarter which housed the mudders, children and artisans came an endless wailing.

They found Rolph standing before his wrecked tent, legs wide apart, red beard sunk on his chest. "So you survived," he said morosely. "Better men didn't."

"Bad?" Iskra patted his arm.

"Five hundred dead on Asgard alone, including both of my mudders and my two youngest," he answered with a bitter shrug. "Hundreds more gone raving mad. This can't continue." He beat his knuckles together until they dripped blood but his eyes remained dry. "We leave here within the week," he added.

"Before our ransom arrives?" Merek's heart sank.

"Yes. We can't wait. Last night's attack was general, the worst we've had. My people can't face another. They'll scatter to their caves. That will be the end of us. Merek, you and your men will remain here. I can't risk your revealing what you know to the Centaurans just now."

"I didn't think last night was so overpowering." The admiral was sparring for time. "Bad enough yes, but nothing to start a stampede over. *I* didn't hear any voices."

"You didn't?" Rolph gripped his arm, the dawn of a strange hope in his haggard eyes. Then he shrugged. "That was because you aren't sensitive. Telepathy can be a handicap at times."

He waved them away and resumed his meditative stance before the ruined tent.

THAT night Merek made a desperate gamble.

"Iskra," he said, "I saved your life last night."

"Yah." Her slim hand found his in the darkness.

"What does barbarian law say about that?" he ventured, playing a hunch based on his sketchy knowledge of mythology.

"Iskra boun' save Merek life." There was a whimper in her voice.

"Will I live long if Rolph leaves me here and the Thing comes back?"

"No—oh *no!*" Her words had a double meaning. "Thing kill aw nex tl' sure."

"You must help me escape—tonight."

"But Iskra promise Brudder Rolph. Rolph kill Iskra—slow."

"*What does the law say?*"

"Law say"—there was a sob in the darkness—"save Brudder Merek."

"Exactly. We're blood brothers now. You must save my life but to do that you'll have to save my men too. I can't escape alone. And you must show us where one of Rolph's old Centauran ships is berthed." He felt ashamed of himself, taking advantage of her super-

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stitions in this way, but Centaurus came first. "You will go with us," he added gently. "Rolph will never find you."

"Rolph find." She sighed.

They crept through the grey snowstorm like shadows. Having made her decision Iskra seemed to have no compunctions. She tried to use Rolph's name to get past the sentries at the hospital. When they hesitated and she sensed them trying to get in telepathic touch with the emperor she knifed one while Merek took care of the other.

They slipped through the quiet wards, arousing the Centaurans. Fifty, they found, were still too weak to be moved. An equal number, most of them Pizarians, flatly refused to leave their warm beds when the project was explained. So there were fewer than four hundred who bundled themselves in all the furs they could find and followed their admiral out into the howling night.

"How far is this ship?" Pancrief asked after they had been breasting the gale for half an hour. With his arm still in a sling he was finding the going hard.

"Oh, t'ree, fo' mi'," Iskra answered cheerfully as she brushed the driving snow out of her eyes. "Jus li'l walk."

"Some of us won't make it," said the thin man. "Must be close to zero."

"Get back to the end of the line and prevent any straggling," Merek ordered. "Manfred and I will police the flanks."

As the slow minutes passed the route began to resemble Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. Men allowed their furs to be stripped from them by the fingers of the wind. They swore, they moaned, they wept—and salt tears froze to their cheeks. Many turned and, despite pleas, threats and blows, trudged back over a patch which was soon obliterated by drifts. Others fell and did not move.

"There's no fight in them," Manfred shouted across the wavering line.

"*Put* fight in them then!" Merek was belaboring a reluctant shadow with the flat of his sword. "We can't leave them here to die."

Leave them they did, nevertheless, before that nightmare journey ended. To have done otherwise would have meant the death of all. As it was hardly a hundred men were left when, after sliding down the walls of a box canyon, they came upon the hidden ship.

Iskra beat on the entry port with the pommel of her sword.

"Oo dere?" a voice came through the vessel's loudspeaker.

"Attack start!" the girl screamed back like a valkyrie. "Let Iskra in. 'Ave order from Brudder Rolph."

"Thor's 'ammer!" gasped the voice. "No crew 'ere. Las' ni' go Asgard 'ave fun."

"Crew come now. 'Ave mo' fun soon. Open port quick. Centauran fleet near."

The port swung wide at that and the guard appeared to peer upward apprehensively.

Iskra had her garrote ready and snared him expertly.

Merek and the half-dead Centaurans flung themselves across the threshold. Gaining strength as the warmth of the interior penetrated their bones they scoured the ship. Three watch officers were overpowered on the bridge. A standby engineer was captured in his cabin. Within fifteen minutes the ship was won.

AS SOON after takeoff as the gravitational pull of Asgard relaxed Merek lined up his men for inspection in the littered and filthy main corridor of the old S. S. Terra. He got an agreeable surprise. There were plenty of frosted noses, ears, toes and fingers in the crowd but he had an impression that the survivors were a superior lot. Well, they should be, he thought.

"Only three Second Gens in the bunch, admiral," said Pancrief softly. He had donned a barbarian kilt, the only clothing to be found on board, and looked more like an ostritch than ever.

Merek nodded. Could it be, he wondered, that longevity had no survival value?

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"Men," he said quietly, "we're half a million miles out of Asgard. Rolph has put two barb ships on our tail but we should be able to shift into hyper before they come within range. And once in hyper we can dodge them.

"I realize you've just taken a bad beating. I hate to give you another. I'd like to ease through hyper. But Rolph's main fleet is taking off in a day or so. We must keep ahead of it if we can and give the alarm. Those who think they can take a rough crossing, step forward."

As one man the line moved up.

"I thought you'd say that. Very well. Strap down for hyper at three hundred. If anything happens to me Captain Pancrief will take over. Captain Manfred will be next in line of command. Thank you."

"Three cheers for Admiral Merek," shouted a lanky youngster in the line.

A lump in his throat, Merek waited until the traditional uproar died. "I wish Centaurus had ten thousand more like you," he choked at last. "Dismissed."

Rolph's ships were still only the faintest of pips on the radar when the Terra wrenched herself from tritium drive into space-warp.

This time the green hell didn't seem quite as bad as on previous occasions. There was plenty of nausea. Many of the crew suffered the usual muscle-tearing spasms. But none died and none cracked up.

"I have a notion all of us matured out on Omega," said Manfred as he, Merek and Pancrief labored over the old fashioned and strangely reluctant warp controls. "I feel older—and I feel good."

"How old are you?" asked Merek.

"Too damned old. Ninety-six, sir."

"Don't look forward to making your first deposit, eh?"

"No sir." It was impossible while in the warp to read the expression on a man's face, but the voice was eloquent. "Sounds awfully sentimental, I know," the captain went on, "but you see, sir, my mother was killed in a plane crash when I was nine. I remember her so well. She used to sing folksongs to me—things like 'Barbara Allen' and 'The Galactic Pioneers.' And she'd tell me stories that almost everybody has forgotten . . . stories of pioneer days. Guess that's why I joined the navy, sir.

"But"—his voice shook ever so slightly—"when I deposit the memories of my first ten years I'll forget her and I'll forget those stories too. You might say I'll forget an important part of *me*. I suppose it's silly but sometimes I think I'd rather grow old and die and be done with it."

"I know." Manfred's words brought thoughts of Merek's own youth flooding back to him—the swimming pool under the fern trees, his father's booming voice, the perfumes from the flower garden which his artist-mother tended with such loving care, the peaches which his ancestors had imported from Earth and planted side by side with yar from Venus and native Merconian fruits, the sleepy reservation across the valley where the last wave of refugees had been interned. He was blessed with visual, aural and tactile memory and the scenes which flanked through his mind were almost as real as life.

"I don't mind forgetting *my* childhood," Pancrief put in. "My parents are divorced. I lived with my grandparents on a rundown farm. *Ugh!* It's that emergency deposit which burned me up."

"But I've told you about everything you forgot," Merek began.

"Everything, huh? What about the visiphone number of the girl whose picture I have in my wallet. I must have met her the day I landed on Pizar. Pretty little trick! You know her?"

Their rambling conversation was interrupted as Iskra burst onto the bridge, whistling merrily. She was not bothered either by hyperspace or thoughts of the Bank. Even the all-pervading green murk failed to disturb her.

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"Hung'?" she asked. "Iskra bri'g lunch." She put down a tray and held it firmly to protect it from the ship's lurches. "Iskra cook goo'."

"Take it away," groaned Pancrief, who was fighting a mild attack of warp sickness. "Cooked goo has no appeal." The others agreed with him.

"W'y ship go slow?" She hopped onto Merek's desk and sat swinging her legs, little girl fashion. Now that she had had a bath—Merek had given it to her, despite kicks and screams—she looked and smelled pretty enough to kiss.

"Ship go fast," the admiral mimicked her. "Any faster and every soul on board would be turned inside out."

"*Huh!*" she jeered. "Rolph fix ship. Go plenty mo' fast. Iskra show."

SHE made a grab for a lever which protruded from a crudely-chopped hole in the main control panel. Merek caught her arm just in time, his heart in his mouth. "Easy, woman!" he yelled.

"No woman—girl!"

"Sorry. Have it your way. But stay away from those controls."

"Aw ri'." She was sulking now. "Merek be sorry." She snatched up the rejected tray and stalked out, miraculously keeping her balance on the wobbly deck.

"What a wench," Pancrief admired. "But what are you going to do with the little hellcat when we get home?"

"*If* we get home." Merek resumed his balancing of the nicked and grimy controls.

"If I may say so, sir," Manfred said after a time, "you—we may have made a mistake in not letting her explain what that lever is for."

"I was a fool." Merek rose groggily. "I'll go talk to her."

But when he found her, playing craps with the barbarian prisoners, Iskra refused to talk. "Too late now." She shrugged crossly.

The Terra popped out of hyper just five days after she had plunged in, to break the record for the Omega run. The white fires of Alpha lay dead ahead. Arcon, outermost of the main planets, was almost too close for comfort. Mercon sparkled green in the middle distance. Beacon, red as a stoplight, could just be seen as it prepared to start its yearly plunge between Alpha I and II. Pizar was occluded by faraway Proxima.

Merek took the minds of his crew members off their aches and pains by setting them to cleaning ship. Then, feeling like a schoolboy going home for vacation, he started warming up the tritium drive and the communicator. Contacting the interplanetary transmitter on Mercon, he asked to be put through to the Council.

"Ether's jammed with high priority stuff," the operator frowned. "Who're you?"

"Rear Admiral Merek, escaped from Omega."

There was a wait of many seconds while his words winged their way across millions of miles of space.

"Sorry, sir." The operator saluted briskly. "Welcome home. I'll put Her Intelligence on at once." His nondescript face faded from the screen to be replaced by a view of Marian's library. The secretary was seated there, her lovely body tense as she leaned forward, waiting for the call.

"Merek reporting," he said, pulses pounding at his first face-to-face meeting with the wisest and most beautiful woman in the universe. "I escaped from Asgard on the remodeled merchantman S.S. Terra with one hundred of my men and six prisoners. Rolph's fleet is close behind. Prepare for an attack in force."

Until his words crossed the void her face remained unchanged. He had a chance to look into those fathomless eyes under brows which slanted upward questioningly—the high cheek bones and the dimple which played at the left corner of those lovely lips.

"Rolph and his fleet landed on Beacon two days ago," she said at last. "They must have some way of getting

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through the warp almost instantaneously. Our fleet is on its way. Make contact with Admiral Mendez and take over command from him at once. Understood?"

"But, Your Intelligence," he ventured to protest. "I have no idea what has been going on in recent weeks. Admiral Mendez. . ."

"Mendez is not yet fully recovered from his fractured skull. He is in no condition to command." Her voice was bitter.

"Well, there must be many more experienced officers than I." He was perspiring freely under that steady appraising gaze.

"That's the trouble, Merek. They have experience but lack imagination. You are the only man we have who can possibly match wits with Rolph."

"Very well, Your Intelligence."

"One thing more—land your crew at Arcon with orders that they deposit their experiences on Omega before reporting to the fleet for reassignment."

Merek licked lips which had suddenly gone stiff. This was it! "I am sorry, Intelligence," he managed at last. "I cannot obey that order."

Utter astonishment spread over her face. Probably, he had time to think, this was the first time she had ever been crossed. "Did I hear you correctly?" she gasped.

"You did."

"It is the law promulgated by the Council for the safety of all Centaurans."

"I know. But I need the experience my men accumulated at Omega. I refuse to have that background pried out of their minds by a Bank teller!"

"Background of defeat!"

"Perhaps!" His eyes clashed with hers. "Nevertheless, they will receive no deposit orders from me. If you wish my resignation. . ."

Suddenly she laughed, a ringing peal that set off harmonics in the mike.

"I like you, brash Merek," she said. "You're the first man who has dared say no to me in a century. I could have you shot for refusing to obey orders. Perhaps I will later. In the meantime, good luck, admiral. And good hunting on Beacon."

IX

IT was a broken Mendez who piped his successor aboard the Alpha. His left cheek twitched. His bark was muted. The other officers who gathered at the conference table also showed various signs of strain. They figeted or fumbled with papers and other articles. The atmosphere was oppressive.

"W-welcome to your new command. Admiral Merek," stuttered the former great man. "Your q-quarters have been prepared. We await y'your orders."

Merek looked around the table from the twittery Mendez to the pompous Marlborough, the phlegmatic Anderson, the sulky Pierce—restored to command out of grim necessity—and half a dozen captains, all of them Second Gens, naturally.

"Each of you will keep his present post," he said at last. "I will remain aboard the Terra with Captains Pancrief and Manfred as my aides."

"That heap of scrap?" Mendez exploded. "It isn't fit for the junkheap."

"I have good reasons for operating in this manner. The first is that the Terra has been tampered with in a way which I must investigate. In the second place I have about decided that we cannot continue to fight Rolph at long range. He is a guerrilla with a number of great advantages on his side, including telepathic control of his crews, the apparent ability to dodge in and out of hyper at will and some method of making his ships invisible which I do not fully comprehend.

"On the other hand, when he operates in this system he is forced to do something which he does not want to do—that is, set up a base where he can establish fuel and ammunition dumps, hospitals and food depots. Our only

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hope, as I see it, is to destroy that base before he can consolidate and fortify it. If we can do this I think we can contain him. But if he continues to hold Beacon nothing can keep him from moving against Arcon, Mercon and Pizar."

"A landing on Beacon?" spluttered Marlborough. "Impossible!"

"Why?" Merek stared the florid man down.

"In a few weeks no Centauran can live on that planet. Why, man, Beacon's mean temperature stands above one hundred fifty degrees Fahrenheit during the three months when it passes between Alpha I and II. We'd be roasted."

"The barbarians evidently don't intend to roast. Scientists have lived on Beacon during opposition. I think we can survive if we have the guts."

"What is your plan?" Anderson spoke for the first time.

"Our only chance is to make the quicket possible run to Beacon, ray the base—crash-land if necessary before Rolph's clumsy ships can rally—dismount our heaviest cannon—deploy them under cover and use them to keep him from following us in. That will give us a breathing spell during which the Pizarian shipyards can complete our third fleet. With the new ships and the knowledge I have gained regarding Rolph's methods of infighting we can lick him."

"Nonsense," muttered Mendez. "We can't win."

"I'm for giving Merek's plan a try," said Pierce.

For once the others voted with the Pizarian.

"Very well, then." Merek spoke with far more confidence than he felt as he studied their slack faces. "Now let's get down to details."

The twenty-million mile run to blistered little Beacon was made at top constant acceleration despite the intense discomfort occasioned by life under a steady pressure of 5G's. Iskra rated it especially because of the way it made her facial muscles sag into a caricature of old age and her dancing feet drag like leaden weights.

"Why Merek no push lever?" she demanded on the endless third day out as she pointed toward the jerry-built contraption on the control panel. "Reach Beacon no ti'. *Zip!*"

"Go into hyper-space here?" Merek was aghast. "Even if that gadget does what you say it will, we'd smash into something or be a light year off-course before I could return the lever to neutral. In addition the ship would expand to infinite size, if unified field math means anything at all, and the whole system would go nova."

"No," she said firmly. "'Urt li'l bit. Dat aw."

"My dear wo—my dear girl," he patronized, "are you aware of the tremendous power needed to warp space? Let me put it this way—Einstein and his successors say that space is curved because of the matter it contains. In fact the universe is a closed curve, like a vast balloon, with the galaxies, stars and planets scattered over its surface.

"Suppose you want to pinch the two sides of that balloon together so that, say, Alpha Centauri and Omega Centauri come close together. instead of being twenty thousand light years apart. Have you any conception of the energy required, the infinite care needed, to perform that maneuver?"

"'Ave gum?" yawned Iskra, taking a stick out of her pocket and frugally breaking it in half. She had developed a passion for the ancient delicacy. It was unknown on Omega. When Merek accepted she clambered laboriously onto a desk and sat regarding him like a prematurely aged imp. "Merek nut," she continued after she had chewed for a while. "Space no like dat."

"What?" he yelled.

SHE went on calmly. "Space close' curve, su', w'at inside?"

"Why, uh," he blinked, "there's nothing inside of the space-time continuum,

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I suppose. What's that got to do with it?"

"If nuttin' inside dis room—just nuttin'—den walls go like dis, no?" She pressed the palms of her hands together.

"Why yes, I guess you're right. If there were *absolutely* nothing, not even space, between the walls, they would have to coincide." He regarded her with new respect. Was he on the verge of discovering Rolph's greatest secret?

"Space like dat," she insisted. "Go through, all star, planet, galaxy, 'mos touch, like dis." She clenched her fist. "Centauran fool. Try to warp space w'en nuttin' to warp. Waste power, go slow, get sick. Barb jus' open door." She threw her bare arms wide. "Step through. *Zip!* Merek try." She was wheedling now. "Jus' push li'l lever."

"How does a kid like you know all this?" He stared at her in awe.

"Aw barb know aw t'ing any barb know," she answered, masticating enthusiastically. "Know aw Centauran know too," she added, jolting him to his toes. "Centaurans no know much. Rolph study lo' ti'. Mighty smart. Fix Centauran hyper-drive goo'."

"I'll say. But, if I push that lever and it works this ship will leave the rest of my fleet 'way behind." He studied her with a dawning suspicion. "Then, when we got to Beacon, Rolph would be waiting to gobble us up. Right?"

"No!" Her face flaming with anger she jumped from her perch, then gasped as her feet hit the deck with a bang. "Rolph no know Merek come." She rubbed her ankles to take the sting out.

"Why not?" He gripped her shoulders. "You're a barb, aren't you? And you're telepathic."

"Iskra no tell Rolph," she whimpered. "Merek save Iskra life. Blood brudder. Iskra no hurt. Is law."

"All right." He relented. "But be careful you don't broadcast by accident."

"Rolph ask Iskra kill Merek," she went on demurely. "Two day since. 'Fore Rolph 'ave go back Omega."

Here was news indeed! Interplanetary telepathy! And Rolph not at Beacon!

"What did you answer?" What an eternal ass he had been to give this wild girl the run of the ship!

"Iskra no answer. No foo'. Rolph get fix. Come grab Merek."

The conversation gave Merek plenty of food for thought as the painful days dragged along. Now he knew that the secret of Rolph's hyperspace maneuverability had been built into the Terra. The barbarian's telepathy worked at interplanetary distances but not through the warp. It was directional. It could be blocked at will. The emperor was not expecting an immediate counter attack or he would not have returned to Omega.

His heart sang. There was a chance of victory—just a chance—providing Iskra did not become annoyed at him for some reason and forget that they were "brudders."

The Centauran ships shrieked down on Beacon with all guns blazing at maximum diffusion. For once they caught the barbarians flatfooted, their attention fixed on constructing the sheet metal warehouses, machine shops and other buildings of the base. There was no answering fire and when they landed only masses of charred bodies greeted them.

"Too easy, Merek," was Pancrief's lugubrious comment. "Much too easy."

The five thousand or so Centaurans sweated out the next week getting the big guns and their atomic generators out of the ships and mounted in concealed positions around the circumference of the arid planet. The cloudless skies were like brass at all hours, for no sooner did Alpha set than Beta rose to take its place.

Daily the heat increased as Beacon prepared for her fiery dive between the two stars. The orbit of Beacon was a complicated figure eight that encom-

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passed each star in turn. Arcon and Mercon, lying out much farther, circled both suns and therefore were never subjected to a similar test.

ONLY the fact that Beacon's gravitational pull was negligible kept the grumbling sailors at their tasks. Few except the veterans on the Terra showed sincere devotion to the Centauran cause. The latter vividly remembered the beating they had taken at Omega and were out to revenge it even if they were dehydrated in the process.

And Iskra accomplished wonders in keeping up their morale. They loved her wink and the tilt of her little grey kilt. They adopted her as their mascot, not only because she was always ready to haul on a line or help put up camouflage nets, but also because she entertained them during the rest periods when it was too hot to rest, by doing naughty highland flings or singing bloodthirsty sagas.

She even taught them swordplay of a sort and the use of more modern hand weapons salvaged from the virtually undamaged warehouses. She also showed the pharmacist's mates how to mix a concoction which took some of the devilish bite out of the heat.

Crews of the other ships sometimes gathered 'round to watch Merek's crewmen, cutting, slashing, tossing grenades and experimenting with the archaic rifles and automatics while Iskra sweated, shouted instructions and praised outstanding performers. But, when the admiral proposed that they too join in the sport, they drifted away to raid the plentiful supplies of mead stored in the warehouses.

As one somewhat effete Arconian engineer put it, "It's bad enough to have to fight those barbarian scum but I draw the line on imitating them!"

The other officers were slow to recognize the value of such exercises but they finally joined their pleas to Merek's—to small avail. Finally orders were issued. The men obeyed by waving swords around and tinkering a bit with the other weapons but they put no enthusiasm into it. They still placed their faith in longrange bloodless combat. Instead of perfecting themselves in the enemy's fighting techniques they quarrelled, gambled, drank heavily and went rapidly to pieces in this corner of hell's kitchen.

When no reinforcements had arrived at the end of a fortnight Merek took the chance of calling Marian on a scrambled circuit.

"I must have ten thousand fresh troops at once, Your Intelligence," he told her firmly. "I can't be responsible for holding this position unless I get help."

"I'm sorry, Merek," she answered wistfully. "You seem to have been too successful. The people love you. They are erecting statues in your honor here. But few of them volunteer to die for you."

"Draft them then," he snarled.

"The Council has proposed a universal draft law but the people must vote on it. Don't forget that Centauran democratic tradition goes back a thousand years."

"The law requiring emergency deposits wasn't voted on."

"I wish it had been." He couldn't see her through the scramble, of course, but he thought there were tears in her voice. "It was a mistake. I see that now. Forgetfulness has made the people overconfident. Past defeats mean little to them now that we have scored one victory. And since you seem to be doing all right out there they see little reason why they should blister their soft skins rushing to your assistance."

"How many men *can* you send me at once?"

"I don't dare weaken the defenses of Mercon and Arcon. That means there's only the police force available—about five thousand men in all."

"Get them here!"

"Are you giving me orders, Merek?" There were knives in her voice again.

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"I'm giving you good advice, woman—advice which may save our system!"

"I don't have ships to send such a force."

"Commandeer the passenger liners on the interplanetary runs."

"That would take weeks."

"It should have been done months ago! Is the Council asleep."

"You insolent young puppy. I—"

"Take it or leave it," he interrupted. "I'll send my ships to you under Mendez for use as transports. There'll be danger of a mutiny here soon if the men have any way of getting home. Load them quickly if you value *your* soft skin. Send cops—robots—even Councilmen—anything you can scrape up. But *send* 'em!" He cut the circuit.

"Scrambler didn't work so good, did it?" said Pancrief the next "day" as they stood at the sun-drenched base, watching the disarmed ships marshalling for the flight home. As he spoke a dozen burnished copper colored globes materialized in the sky! Rolph had returned from Omega.

"The Emp seems to have shipped some new heavy stuff," was Pancrief's acid comment as beams of blue radiance lashed out from several of the ships.

Before the Centauran vessels could be got under way by their skeleton crews, most of them were slanting down toward Beacon, hulled in dozens of places and out of control. As had happened previously only the Alpha was allowed to limp away.

"What's the matter with *our* guns?" Merek yelled.

HIS answer came instantly. From emplacements scattered along the rocky hills, radiation snatched at the barbarian ships. Three of them blazed into incandescence. The fragile, titanium hull of even the most powerful warship could withstand a direct hit for seconds only.

Before the beams could center on other craft the latter exploded of their own volition. Swarms of fragments glittered in the sunlight for a moment, then vanished. With nothing sizeable left to shoot at the Centauran beams wavered and cut off.

"Arm yourselves with hand weapons," Merek bellowed as he raged among the huddled warehouses and the huddling terrified Centaurans. "Pancrief, see that swords, rifles and machine guns are distributed. *Anderson!*" He shook the Arconian out of a semi-stupor. "Throw a cordon around the base. Here you!" He grabbed a petrified lieutenant. "Find Marlborough. Tell him I said to get his men digging trenches—throwing up barricades. On the double!"

Gradually, some sort of order was restored. As the self-propelled cells out of which the barbarian spaceships had been assembled drifted to the ground, a ragged battle line was formed. Marlborough, puffing and blowing, deployed his crews among the sand dunes to the south of the warehouse cluster. Anderson took the cliffs to the west. Pierce scattered a detachment of would-be machine gunners through some scrub in the eastern valley.

Merek, Pancrief, Manfred and their handful of veterans took shelter along the flanks of the S.S. Terra. This ship, which had been too small to be worth using as a transport, still lay on the sand north of base. It partially blocked a continuation of the eastern valley which was free of brush and seemed to invite attack.

Hardly had the lines been set up when the barbs emerged from the protection of their cells, formed loose companies around their tribal standards and waited, shouting insults, for the order to attack.

"There's Rolph," said Pancrief, who was lying in a hastily-dug foxhole beside his chief. He pointed to where the emperor's red head towered above those of his men. "Shame the Terra doesn't mount any cannon."

"Rolph feel goo'," grunted Iskra from Merek's other side. "Got Merek now."

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"Merek!" The emperor bellowed through cupped hands. "Do you surrender, or do I have to come and get you?"

"Come and get me." Merek stood up and shouted back.

The barbarians roared. They liked the big Centauran and they also liked a fight. Rolph lifted his two-handed sword. His warriors emptied their rifles at the fox holes in front of the grounded ship. Then they threw them away, snatched up automatics and bags of hand grenades and lunged forward in a roaring apparently undisciplined mob.

"Rolph make mistake," Iskra shouted over the outlandish racket. "More good strike at Marlborough. Sof' line dere."

"*Shhh!* Don't even think that! He may hear you!" Merek too had been fretting about the rear. He hugged a rifle awkwardly and fired burst after burst of the barbarians' own dum-dums at the sprinting emperor. Dodging, seeking cover where there was any; crawling over the tops of dunes to avoid being silhouetted against the sky, the giant came on though men fell screaming on all sides of him.

The veterans of the Omega expedition, small in number though they were, put up a good show. They fired slowly, getting a man with each murderous bullet. Long before they came within grenade range the furclad warriors wavered. As casualties became unbearable they turned and fled.

X

A sailor, posted on top of the ship, began to blare the good news to the camp through a loudspeaker. Cheers rang out behind the embattled company.

"Rolph mad now," Iskra reported, eyes shining. "Big fight come."

"Pancrief, get back and warn them," snapped Merek. Then to the girl, "Doesn't Rolph have any heavier guns?"

"Comin' up! Take ti' get ready."

Almost at once the characteristic burp of bazookas made itself heard. The Centaurans began to suffer their first casualties as shells burst among them.

Working around the circle of trenches, doing his best to encourage the other officers and their quaking men, Merek found time to marvel at the primitive nature of the fighting. In their enthusiasm over radiation beams his people had always scorned the use of messy small arms. On the other hand barbarian weapons were only refinements of twentieth-century stuff which they had found described in books salvaged from Earth.

Soon after he returned to his sun-baked post near the Terra, the entire barb line began to move. This time the warriors were cautious. They crawled forward like Indians under cover of a bazooka barrage.

Somewhat to Merek's surprise the Centaurans stood fast and did a fair amount of execution with rifles they quickly learned how to use.

The attack dribbled away. The defenders cheered briefly, then grew silent as a new flock of cells made its appearance overhead. They expected to be bombed from the air but the cells passed over and landed in a circle around the emperor's twark-tail standard.

"Rolph no want spoil supply at base," Iskra answered Merek's unspoken question. Then she drew in her breath sharply. "Fee come in cell. Bad!"

"What do they use the fees for?" asked Pancrief, who had just returned from his rounds to report all quiet.

Before she could answer, the brush parted to reveal the most outlandish sight the Pizarian had ever witnessed. Half a hundred barbarians, mounted on the pale yellow insects Merek had hunted on Asgard, came charging up the valley toward them.

Because of Beacon's low gravity the creatures seemed little handicapped by their riders, who clung to some sort of harness on the bulbous hairy bodies.

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They approached with the speed of dreams in twenty foot leaps. Merek's little band cursed but did not waver. Each fired until the gun scorched his hands or jammed. At closer range grenades created green-spattered havoc. And, when the survivors still came on the Centaurans leaped out of their foxholes and met the nightmare steeds with cold steel.

Iskra showed them how to do it. Ducking in and out of the ruck she dodged the dripping palms and mandibles and the blows aimed at her by the riders while she slashed at the tips of those awful legs with her sword. Cheering her to the echo the men followed their mascot's example. Apparently this was the one attack the fee cavalry could not cope with. In a twinkling the twenty or so barbarians remaining were dismounted and fighting back to back for their lives.

The defenders' experience at swordplay served them in good stead now. Wild with fury at what they considered a sneak attack, they leaped over, dived under or went through the living wall. And the warriors died to a man.

Merek was dripping blood from several light wounds before it was over and he could shout to the ship's lookout for information on the rest of the battle.

"Not so good, sir," the sailor called down. "The line's rolled back to the warehouse—what's left of it. They didn't know what to make of those yellow varmints. Don't think they can hold much longer. We're cut off."

"Men," said Merek to his sweating, panting crew, "if we lose Beacon we're done for. The other planets can't be held long if Rolph gets a foothold here. I don't ask the impossible. There are eight of you left on your feet. If you say so we'll take the Terra up and go for help. But if you'll follow me we can take the barbs in the rear and give 'em what for. How about it?"

"Let's go!" yelled a sailor, covered from head to foot with the green ichor of a slaughtered fee. "I said it before and I say it again. Three cheers for Admiral Merek."

They grabbed up their guns and as much ammunition as they could carry. They started for the group of warehouses at a ragged double.

Pandemonium reigned inside the compound. The hollow crash of grenades exploding within sheet metal walls mingled with the shrieks of the wounded and dying and the hoarse yells of the victory-glutted barbarians.

THE sailors followed Iskra, Pancrief and Merek down the single street. Where was Manfred? The admiral found a split second in which to wonder. They laid a wall of hot lead before them. Rolph's men, engaged in closing a solid ring of steel around their crumbling foes, howled like wolves as they tried to turn and meet this unexpected assault.

Iskra went berserk again. Her eyes stared. When her grenades were exhausted she drew her bloody sword and swung it like a maniac. Froth formed at the corners of her mouth and whipped away in the hot, smoke-filled wind as she sang:

"Tempered and sharpened
On far Omega
Come now w't Merek
To take goo' revenge.
Make way fo' de lightnin'.
Run far from de thunder.
No barb dare face Merek.
Rolph day now be done!"

Her companions took up the chant until it swelled high above the other battle noises. They formed a wedge and bored in—in—in—until it seemed that the Amazon's prophecy might come true. The barbarians, who had spent their first fury, could not stand before them. They gave back grudgingly.

The other crews took heart and rallied. Merek saw Anderson swinging a crowbar as though it were a tooth pick. Pierce and a few of his men gained the roof of the largest warehouse and be-

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gan hurling grenades into the ruck.

The Centaurans' ammunition was exhausted now and the press was too tight for anything but infighting. With Merek flanking Iskra on the right and Pancrief on the left the dwindling flying wedge bucked ahead. No one stood long before their dripping blades—until Rolph fought his way around a corner and barred their way.

"No furder!" He spoke as though lecturing children.

Iskra, like a feminine David, struck at the barbarian Goliath with all the force of her berserk insanity. He parried, reversed in mid-swing and slashed at her throat. She just managed a riposte and continued on with a catlike molinet aimed at the emperor's eyes. He sprang back with an agility almost incredible for one of his size—escaped with a cut that laid his cheek open to the bone.

"Iskra surrender, no die," he said once.

She spat in his face and launched a blow at his hip which sent him leaping backward again.

That attack proved her undoing. Her foot slipped in a pool of blood as she tried to follow her advantage. Rolph struck as coldly as a surgeon wielding a scalpel.

As the broadsword whistled down, Merek shot out his own blade to deflect it. The force of the blow drove him to his knees but he managed to get in front of the sagging girl.

"Coward!" he raged. "Your life or mine, Rolph."

"Sorry!" Rolph showed his white teeth in what was meant for a grin. "I forgot she was your girl. We don't—" he caught a stinging blow on his hilt—"have time—" he lashed out like a demon—"have time for chivalry—" he too slipped but recovered—"out among the star clusters."

Thrust and parry—slash and dodge—there was no finesse to the combat. Yet it raged so fiercely that, all about, barbarians and Centaurans stopped to watch, even to cheer. Merek thanked his stars for the training with edged weapons Iskra had given him. A fencer would have been dead long ere this.

He realized that he was no match for the red-bearded giant. So far he had managed to escape injury but he had inflicted no wounds and momentarily he felt strength leaking away through his fingertips.

"For Iskra!" he panted, putting every ounce of the strength which remained in one last despairing blow at that horned helmet which swam before him.

Rolph had no time to parry or perhaps disdained to do so. He, too, brought his sword down with all the force of his mighty arms.

MEREK regained consciousness to find a battered and bandaged Pancrief trying to feed him mead with a spoon.

"Thank God you're awake." The Pizarian's larynx bobbed like a cork.

"What happened?" He tried to sit up in the narrow bunk but thought better of it.

"Your crash helmet proved to be made of harder stuff than the fancy thing Rolph was wearing."

"He's—?"

"Quite dead."

"And the others?—Manfred—?"

"He'll never worry again about forgetting his mother."

"Marlborough, Anderson, Pierce?"

"Anderson's alive, but will not fight again. The rest are dead, sir."

"How did we escape?"

"Rolph's son took command when his father fell. He gave us safe conduct to the Terra—the hundred and fifty odd who were left—more than half of them our own boys, you'll be proud to know, sir." Pancrief's long face was working strangely. "The barbs lined up, their swords at salute, and cheered us as we collected our wounded, entered the ship and took off."

"And they hold Beacon?"

"They hold Beacon."

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"Where are we now?"

"Coming in for a landing at Mercon City. I pushed Iskra's lever like she showed me once when you weren't looking." The captain began to blubber. "It worked just fine."

"And Iskra?" The dread question could not be put off any longer.

"Dying, sir. She's conscious but in no pain."

"Take me to her." He sat up, conquered his dizziness and allowed Pancrief to help him to his feet.

"Hi, brudder Merek." The girl winked gravely as he entered her cabin. Chest swatched in bandages through which bright blood was seeping, she was half sitting, propped up by many pillows, in her bunk. They had washed her pale face. She looked utterly feminine and lovely as she stretched out one hand. "Come say goo'by Iskra."

"Oh, now," he began. "You're not . . ." He was stopped by the look in her eyes.

"Dark come soon, mebbe so like in tent," she said after she had held his hand for a long while. "Kiss Iskra 'gain, like dat ti'."

He pressed trembling lips to her firm cold ones.

"No cry, brudder," she whispeerd. "No 'urt to die."

"Don't," he begged. And then he lied because he thought it would please her. "I love you, Iskra."

"No," she smiled. "Merek no love Iskra. Different from girl on Mercon. Too much like boy—like brudder. Dat goo' too."

"No," he choked. "I—"

"Iskra die now," she interrupted. "Be born 'gain soon. Be great warrior, mebbe so." She turned her face to the cabin wall and added faintly. "No fun. Merek—no—dere."

"Iskra," he raged. "You can't quit like this!"

"Iskra no quit." She stirred restlessly. "Jus' tire'. Res' li'l bit."

"*Quitter!*" he taunted, fighting back his sobs. "Here we are, coming in for a landing on Mercon. The best doctors in the universe will be waiting to come aboard and help you. "An'," he shifted into the patois in his desperate effort to reach her fading spirit, "Iskra curl up like sick twark—jus' w'en brudder Merek need mos'!"

"Merek *need* Iskra?" She turned her head to look at him in astonishment.

"Sure," he improvised. "Mebbe so, Thing come Mercon soon. Merek need Iskra 'elp 'im fight."

"Oh." She took a long, shuddering breath. "Den 'old Iskra 'and."

When the doctors were dragged into the cabin by Pancrief an hour later, they found the two lying unconscious together, hands locked in a grip which they had difficulty in breaking.

XI

A WEEK later Merek had sufficiently recovered from his head wound to face one of the rare gatherings of the full Centauran Council. Still weak and subject to dizzy spells he was allowed the privilege of sitting in the presence of those august personages who guided the destinies of three billion people.

The many-pillared room, filled with sunlight and flowers, gave no hint of the doom that was creeping upon the three planets. The councilors, dressed in the simple white robes of their office, sat like Roman senators on folding curial chairs, their backs to an animated tri-dimensional mural of the Centauran solar system.

Those present included Anthony of Arcon, the physicist—Merton, the archeologist—Poynetz, the Pizarian philosopher—Martin, the economist—half a dozen other Arconian and Merconian geniuses whose names Merek's tired mind refused to recall—white-haired but otherwise hale and hearty Arthur Franklin, Council President and last man alive of the first generation of Centauran pioneers—and finally Marian, historian and secretary of the gathering.

Merek had eyes only for her. She was

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far more serenely beautiful than he had imagined for no visi-screen could do her justice. She was the epitome of his dreams of fair women. An ancient quotation drifted through his bemused mind—"She could actually hear the great stars in heaven, speaking from their motion and brightness, saying things perfectly to the cosmos." Well, it was too late now. He was pledged to a wild woman from Omega.

He managed to take a firm grip on his thoughts and finally concluded his report: "We captured Beacon but could not hold it," he said. "If I still have your confidence I will lead another expedition there as soon as more warships are completed. If not I hereby tender my resignation."

"Merek did a magnificent job with the forces available." Marian's smile warmed his aching heart.

"True." Franklin spoke as though the weight of his endless years bore heavily upon him. "So let us not speak of resignations—nor of expeditions."

"My men stand ready to fight to the death," Merek cried.

"Your *young* men do, perhaps," Franklin corrected. "But the Second Gens, even those persons who have made only a few memory deposits, failed you and will continue to fail you. Is it not so?"

The admiral stood mute.

"Moreover," the old old man went on gently, "recent emergency deposits have disoriented even the youngest elements. Totally unprepared for defeat they have now developed serious neuroses which no further deposits can cure. For all of these reasons the majority of the Council has agreed that the Bank is a failure."

"The Bank has given us the highest type of civilization known to exist," Poynetz stayed true to Pizarian rebel form by commenting acidly. "And it has given us immortality."

"Not true immortality." Franklin's voice rang with a sort of anger. "It has no survival value. We are being overwhelmed by a lower culture. Our epitaph will be that we dreamed of immortality but were unable to achieve it."

"Perhaps," ventured a Pizarian sociologist, "barbarian civilization has risen higher than ours. They have developed telepathy, Admiral Merek says, and an amazing ability to adapt themselves to hyper-space and other hostile environments. I. . ." He stopped in confusion, conscious of the horrified stares of other Councilors. Here was a conception their proud minds automatically rejected.

"Nonsense," said Franklin. "Nevertheless we are not now and probably never will be in a position to defend ourselves from the Omegan horde. Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, Spain, Britain and other terrestial civilizations fell fighting and were ground to powder because they refused to admit their decadence. We shall be wiser than they. We shall bow before the barbarians and ask their mercy. In that way some part, at least, of our culture may survive."

"Is there no other way, Your Intelligence?" cried Merek, whose wound had begun to pound again. "I have been on Omega. I have seen its filth and berserk brutality. The barbarians will show us no mercy. I would gladly die to prevent them ravening across my homeland."

"Would enough others die with you?" the President demanded. "The people are begging for peace at any price. I am embarrassed when they kneel before me in the streets, embrace my knees, kiss my hands and ask me to let the barbarians come, if necessary, to prevent their death."

"There *must* be a way. There *has* to be one." Merek struggled to his feet and gripped the platinum railing before the dais until his knuckles showed white.

IT WAS Marian who leaned forward and spoke. "Do you know what it is?"

"It may still not be too late to make

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some sort of alliance with the barbs against the thing they fear on Omega. There must be thousands of habitable planets in that star cluster, with room enough for all."

"Wishful thinking, my boy," said Franklin. "It is too late."

"Let me try to find some other solution then."

There was a whispered consultation among the Councilors.

"We grant you three months," Franklin said at last. "Yesterday the Council signed a truce of that length with Rolphson. As a result the new emperor has withdrawn from Beacon to Asgard to await our formal surrender."

"Perhaps Beacon became too hot even for barbarians," Merek gritted.

"Perhaps—at least we have a three month breathing spell."

"Will you help me find a way of escape—and give me authority to follow it if there is a chance of success?"

Something akin to hope was reborn on the dais. "We shall all help you," Marian answered, placing her hand over his clenched fist.

"Very well then." He snapped the droop out of his shoulders. "I would like to return to my home to think and to recover from this wound. I want to take my crew, my prisoners and the ship I captured on Omega. I think I can induce the barbarians"—he meant Iskra but could not quite bring himself to say so—"to explain the ways in which they have altered the S.S. Terra. There are hospitals and rest homes near my village where my men can recover their health and spirits. Finally, I must feel free to consult any member of the Council at any time. If I find what I am looking for we shall have to act instantly."

"Agreed," said Franklin. "You are our only hope now, son."

The enormity of what he had done struck Merek full in the face as he walked down the marble stairs. He, a youngster not yet in the prime of life, had been given carte blanche by the greatest minds of the age on his half-promise to save civilization—and he hadn't an idea of how to proceed.

Well! He breathed deeply. It was spring again. The dreaming city was one mass of bloom. Smiling, tall, decadent men and women strolled barefoot along the grass-covered streets as though a world were not ending. He loved the placid city. A shame if the barbarians put it to the torch but nothing that hadn't happened thousands of times when contented people forgot that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty!

Contented people? Remembering the woman he had seen during his first landing on Asgard, he pondered whether many Centaurans might not welcome a little carnage to vary the tenor of their uneventful, endless lives. Maybe Centaurus was slowly boring itself to death. He must investigate that angle the next time he talked to Marian. Humming an old tune he strode toward the nearest visi-booth to make arrangements for his homecoming.

Merekton, which his family had colonized and named with typical pioneer lack of imagination, was balm to Merek's wounded body and spirit for the first week or so after his arrival. It was good to hear his father's booming voice as they tramped the hills or sat under drooping fern trees beside the lake and discussed an encyclopedia of zoölogy on which the older man was working.

It was good to have his artist mother fuss over him. It was good to see the wide-eyed hero worship with which his sister Matilda, a serious-minded adolescent, regarded him. It was even good to meet again his grandparents, great grandparents, great-great grandparents and a host of other smiling soft-voiced relatives of varying degrees of "greatness" who still lived on the ancestral homestead. Most of them he had almost forgotten but still it was good to have them welcome him back from the stars.

Yet, as the lazy days passed, Merek

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began to feel a vague discontent. He fretted about Iskra, though frequent reports from the spaceport hospital assured him she would recover. Then he could not ignore the fact that his parents had lost all recollection of his childhood days. He had been born when they were in their nineties.

Now, when he himself had reached fifty, they had made four Bank deposits at the regular ten year intervals and therefore could remember him only as they had known him when he had grown to manhood. It was disheartening to make some reference to an incident in his early youth and be met by polite uncomprehending stares. Only with Matilda did he have any real continuity.

"I feel rootless," he told Pancrief one evening as they sat watching the sunsets from the veranda of the rest home bar. By mutual consent they had formed the habit of meeting there to compare notes on their so-far fruitless efforts to solve the secret of the Terra's hyper-space drive.

"I know," answered the captain. "I never go home any more if I can dodge it." He nodded to a pair of crew members as they climbed the veranda steps. "Of course my grandparents try to make me feel comfortable. They even read up on diaries they kept during my boyhood. But it's no good." He downed his drink, then grinned. "I think that big lug behind the bar is putting water in the Scopio. Wish they had a servo back there instead of a human! Wish I had a horn of mead. Boy, that stuff had a real kick, didn't it."

"It sure did," sighed one of the newcomers. "You know, those barbs may be full of fleas but they sure know how to make liquor."

"Isn't there anything to *do* around this dump, admiral?" asked his pug-nosed companion. "I've rested, swum and stuffed myself until I'm about to go bats."

"Aren't the girls treating you right, Allison?" Pancrief grinned.

"*Girls!*" exploded the one who had spoken first. "The girls around here remind me of beautiful dolls. They go sweeping around all covered up in those fluttery robes. They're polite but they only want to talk about things like advawnced art and the latest visidramah!" Words failed him.

"Give me one of those barb Amazons any day—or night," Allison agreed, his eyes brightening. "If you don't object, sir . . ." He looked at Merek. "I'd like to tell you about one I met. She stood six feet tall in her boots but—"

"Not now, lieutenant," said Merek as he noted a disapproving frown on the face of the hovering bartender. "Yes," he said to that worthy, "another drink all around." To the others he added, "if you're bored, why don't you pay a visit to the reservation? It's not far from here."

"The reservation?" asked pug-nose—"What was his name?" thought Merek. "Oh yes, it was Pound"—"You mean where they keep the last batch of refugees from Earth? Didn't know they let anybody in."

"The refugees aren't 'kept' there, Pound. They stay of their own accord. And they'll be glad to see you. I used to know their captain pretty well. He's an old man by now but he might remember me. How about getting some of the boys together? We'll make a day of it tomorrow. Learn how our ancestors lived."

"Gee—swell!" cried Allison. "Anything to get out of this dump."

"Suits me," said Pound. "When do we start?"

MEREK briefed the party of two dozen or so who appeared the next morning. The greater part of his crew was still laid up. "Now men, we're going to pay a visit to the descendants of the last persons to escape from Earth before it went nova. You'll find them a rather queer lot. But don't act surprised or laugh at their odd customs. They're very proud. Also they're an independent nation with full diplomatic relations

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and all that.

"They drifted in here on a battered old hulk about a half century ago. Since then they've flatly refused to become assimilated by making Bank deposits, using our servo-mechanisms or attending our schools. Out of respect for the past of the human race the Council gave them a few thousand acres of land and has since left them strictly to their own devices."

"How many of them are there," someone wanted to know.

"About a thousand men, women and children. And that's another thing I want to warn you about. You'll see great numbers of children and of more or less senile old people. This will be a new experience for you but don't act surprised or shocked or we'll be shown the door. Understood? All right, let's start."

They completed their ten-mile hike well before noon. Wheeled or winged vehicles were barred from the neighborhood of the reservation. They found themselves looking down from the brow of a wooded hill on a pleasant village of log houses. In its center was a square which served as final resting place for the wreckage of a spaceship. There too the flag of the United Nations fluttered bravely from a tall pole.

Around the village lay a number of well-tended fields where men, women and older children were laboring with hand tools. Farther away flocks of sheep, cows and horses were grazing.

"Don't they even use tractors?" Allison marveled.

"No," said Merek. "They will have nothing to do with power tools of any kind. The draft animals they brought with them are used for the heaviest work but everything else is done by manual labor. They contend that all machines, especially all weapons, are enemies of the human race."

"But that kind of toil is fit only for robots," a sailor exploded.

"And when do they find time to think and study?" mused Pancrief. "Why, they're worse than the barbs. They've reverted to savagery."

"Don't be too sure," said Merek. "They're mighty nice folks."

A messenger had preceded the visitors, so they were met at the edge of the village by a round-eyed mob of overalled children. These showed no signs of timidity or of rudeness. They were neither hostile nor friendly.

The Centaurans formed ranks and marched smartly into the square. They were greeted at the flagpole by a bald and wrinkled ancient, dressed in the frayed uniform of a U. N. Planetary Patrol Captain. He leaned on the arm of a slight sweetly-rounded girl with freckles and red-gold hair. She wore no stockings and her knee-length dress was made of homespun.

"Welcome to our fair city, Admiral Merek," quavered the old man, "and another welcome to your crew. We have heard great things about your exploits."

"Thank you, Captain McCarthy," the Centauran replied with a salute. "Perhaps you remember me. I used to come here from Merekton when I was a boy."

"Can't say I do—can't say I don't. There are so many Mereks. They all look, think and dress alike." He chuckled, then became serious again. "This is my granddaughter, Sharon. She will show you about. You will, of course, be my guests for supper."

"Thank you, captain. But we don't want to impose on your hospitality."

The greybeard straightened his back and frowned. "I insist, sir! As a duly appointed representative of the United Nations, I . . ." He shook his head as though to clear it. "No, that's not right any more."

"As ambassador . . ." Sharon prompted, looking embarrassed at her toes.

"Ah yes. As a duly appointed ambassador to the Centauran Council . . . Oh, what nonsense am I talking? Our fare is rough—not fit for your palates."

"You have wonderful food," Merek hastened to assure him as he seemed on the verge of senile tears. "Fried

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chicken—baked beans—pie—all the old dishes. My men and I will enjoy them immensely. We accept your invitation with pleasure."

"Heh, heh. I believe I do remember you, boy. You're the little shaver who was always after me to tell you the old tales about John Paul Jones and guerilla fighting and how the Ark escaped from the Oligarchs. No wonder you gave the Siriuns such a licking out on—Arcon, wasn't it? How you could eat!"

"Grandpa!" Sharon spoke as to a child.

"And now, if you will excuse me," McCarthy said obediently, "I will leave you in Sharon's hands. I am an old man and mustn't stay too long under these alien suns." He tottered away with the girl's tender assistance and entered the largest of the cabins. The Centaurans shifted their feet and began to wish they had not come.

"Boy, I'm glad I don't have to get old, ever," Pound breathed.

"Oh, I don't know," Allison disagreed. "He seems to be having a pretty good time and he has a granddaughter to take care of him. Why, I'll bet *my* granddaddy has forgotten I'm alive."

XII

TO THEIR growing surprise, the men all had a good time that day. They inspected the wreck of the Ark and marveled that such a rattletrap could have left Earth's atmosphere, let alone make a trip more than four light years. They gradually made friends with the children. They went out into the weedless fields and found the people direct and sincere, even though they did have calloused hands and smelled of honest sweat and manure.

They couldn't keep their eyes off the laughing bright-eyed girls they met. And, amazingly enough, they were completely taken by the old people who sat, gnarled hands folded, in their doorways or under the trees in the square and told them long, rambling tales of Earth's proud history and its last tragic flame-whipped years.

Pancrief particularly seemed hypnotized by Sharon. He followed her about like a dog, laughed at her simple jokes and looked at her until she blushed and stammered but did not take offense. She was so utterly naive and so different from any girl he had ever met that the cynical Pizarian fell head over heels in love at first sight. Once Merek saw him take out of his wallet the photograph of the Pizarian girl whose name he had forgotten and tear it into small bits.

"Are all those things true that the old folks have been telling us, sir?" Pound asked Merek that evening when they were seated at long trestle tables in the square, attacking the strange and delicious foods with which the women of the colony kept heaping their plates. "About Christopher Columbus crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a rowboat, I mean, and how that fellow Drake sank the French Armada? I don't remember learning stuff like that in school."

"They have mixed things up a trifle but you'll find even more exciting true tales like those in the old printed books if you take the trouble to read them."

"Makes you sort of proud to be human, doesn't it?" said the lieutenant as he investigated a piece of pie. "Guess that's what makes these poor folks keep their chins up."

Merek was doing some deep thinking. He felt that the answer to the barbarian onslaught was almost within his grasp. As the men marched home through the starlight, singing the quaint folksongs they had learned after supper, he kept turning the problem over in his mind.

Somehow, he must make all Centaurans proud that they were men—proud enough to fight for their heritage. But how? Send the ancient minstrels of the reservation throughout the planets? In three months? Ridiculous! Besides, Mercon, Arcon and Pizar had proud histories of their own, though they were almost unknown except to

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savants. His head began to ache again.

As the weary days rolled by the grounded admiral began making frequent trips to Mercon City. He told himself he went to see Iskra, who was still in a hospital bed, weak and helpless as a kitten. He told himself he went to seek solutions to his insoluble problems in the endless stacks of the Council library. He told himelf he went to escape his well-meaning but boring relatives. He would not admit that his long talks with Marian in her quiet office had anything to do with the matter.

Yet, like everyone else who had met her, he had fallen completely under the secretary's spell. Her remote beauty, which seemed the product of some alien star, held him breathless. The clean fragrance of her body made his senses reel. Her mind, crammed with the knowledge of ages, made him want to grovel at her naked feet.

With a motherly interest which he sometimes vaguely resented she taught him to use the film-and-dot library indexes which made the recorded history of the three planets almost instantly available.

In the dust-covered metal foil books and the later tri-di films he learned the full details of how his forebears fought out from Earth toward the rim of the galaxy along the only route not barred to them by the lordly Siriuns. He saw them besieged at their first base on Pizar by the semi-intelligent primates dominant there—saw the mad suicide charge led by young Mendez that broke the strangling ring about the camp.

HE WATCHED them expand to Mercon and Arcon as the old guard of First Generationers died one by one to conquer the strange diseases and stranger beasts of the system. He learned how Franklin and a few surviving comrades created the Memory Bank so their sons and daughters could live longer than their allotted "four score and ten" and thereby acquire the maturity needed to lift the race above the Cain-and-Abel thinking which had always shackled it.

Then, abruptly, the epic story ended. It was succeeded by recordings of a placid almost-changeless flow of life on fully-developed, rich and peaceful planets. He turned from the screen, baffled and saddened.

"The sap went out of our people centuries ago," he muttered.

"I know." Marian pressed his hand. "The Memory Bank was a magnificent try but it failed. It prolonged life but it stopped progress."

"Why?" he cried. "Granted that in order to continue living indefinitely wise men must deposit parts of their wisdom in the Bank as the decades pass, we were always told that that wisdom had merely been transferred to imperishable electronic records and was available for study and synthesis. Surely the accumulated knowledge of a millenium can produce some philosophy or some weapon with which to defeat the barbarians."

"Have you ever listened to a Bank deposit?" she asked sorrowfully.

"Never. They are restricted to savants, I was always told."

"No longer from you. We have the deposits of all Councilors available here at the Capitol. You may listen to one of Franklin's if you wish."

She led him to a chair in the corner of the room. Lifting a complicated, helmet-like affair out of a niche in the wall, she adjusted it on his temples and flipped a switch . . .

An alarm was shrilling. He stretched out a cramped arm and shut it off. Why, he thought, can't I ever remember to get one of those ionization gadgets which would wake me gently at just the right moment? . . . This dark brown taste . . . Shouldn't smoke cigarettes after dinner at my age! Franklin's still a child when it comes to appeasing his appetites . . . How old am I anyway? Let's see . . . This is May first, Two Thousand Nine Hundred and Eighty-one, A.D. . . .

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Now whatever does "A.D." mean? . . . Oh yes, "Anno Domini . . . Christians to the lions . . . Cold in this room! Or is my circulation acting up again? . . . Where are those slippers . . . Confound that lazy robot . . . Getting old along with me, perhaps . . . Where is the damned tooth polisher? Maybe it would help to get my eyes open and look for it . . . Ah! Refreshing. No wonder they advertise it so heavily, although the sight of a man cleaning his teeth is not particularly edifying.

Now let's see. What's up today? . . . Conference with that fool, Poynetz . . . He hasn't had a new thought since the pigs ate grandpa . . . Has style though . . . People's choice . . . Young squirt! He can't be over three hundred . . . Wonder what pigs were and why they went for grandpa . . . Bacon! . . . Oh yes, bacon and eggs . . . Traditional American breakfast food . . . Pigs all died here . . . Grandpas all lived . . . Still have eggs, anyway, though they don't seem to taste as good as they used to . . . Now where did that confounded idiotic robot put my new robe? . . . Servo-mechanism! *Hah!*

There was a distant click. Merek found himself staring dazedly at Marian.

"Had enough?" she asked.

"You mean . . ." He leaped to his feet. "That's the kind of junk the Bank vaults are stuffed with?"

"Franklin's is high order material. Remember, he is a genius. Some of the deposits are—horrible." Her eyes were bitter.

"How long was I—listening?"

"About a minute."

"During which time a genius crawled out of bed, put on his slippers and washed his teeth. Ten minutes, let's say. It's complete recall, isn't it?" As she nodded, he rushed on. "Then, to listen to a full ten-year deposit, one would have to withstand about a year of that drivel in the hope of locating a worthwhile thought or two?"

"That's right. In the brain recollections like those on which you eavesdropped are only brought to consciousness rarely if ever. You must understand that the brain has an index infinitely superior to the film-and-dot system used by our libraries. That index can sort a needed memory out of a million unwanted ones and bring it to consciousness almost instantly."

"And the Bank has no index?" he gasped.

"All it has is the name of each depositor and a chronology."

"Impossible!"

"Merek, it has been my life task to develop a workable index. For almost a thousand years I have spent most of my waking hours trying to solve the riddle. I have failed!" She bowed her splendid head.

"But why? It seems simple."

"To a layman perhaps. Come, let us sit down. The Bank," she continued in her best lecturing style when they had made themselves comfortable, "is merely Franklin's further development of work started back in Nineteen Hundred and Fifty by a Doctor Goldman of Syracuse University. Goldman discovered that radar could be used to pick up and put on a moving map the tiny electrical impulses and accompanying activities of the brain. It was but a short step to the analysis of such impulses by means of the cybernetic calculators then coming into use.

"Franklin and his associated surgeons took the next step when they determined that senility is caused by the fact that the brain's own index has its limitations. That is, the number of brain molecules upon which memories can be impressed seems almost infinite but the synaptic 'connectors' are much fewer."

MEREK floundered. "You mean that the brain's 'switchboard' finally becomes so overloaded that calls for needed memories get lost in the shuffle?"

"Something like that," Marian condescended. "Franklin reasoned that if he could wipe the memory impressions off a part of the brain molecules which

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serve as nature's own memory bank, not only would he relieve congestion in the synaptic 'switchboard' but the cleaned molecules could be re-used to store more up-to-date knowledge."

"I see." The admiral clutched at another analogy. "Too much alcohol will produce amnesia by wiping impressions off the cortex—although the molecules seldom are good for much afterward."

"True. Franklin's technique did not damage the brain. It merely removed a decade of impressions, beginning with those of infancy and early youth and continuing so that the brain of the depositor never retained more than ninety years of its knowledge. Then he made the final step by transferring those impressions to an electronic brain. Theoretically they remained available for reference at any time."

"But practically," said Merek, "he only recorded the thoughts of depositors, both inconsequential and important, in chronological order. To find any information of value one would have to wade through the entire hodgepodge. I'd go crazy!"

"Most investigators would—and did until the deposits became so extensive that we practically gave up attempting to scan them."

"You mean they're not used any more?" He thought with horror of the millions of deposit panels in the Bank vaults of three planets, each bearing on its face the name and reference number of a depositor and a date.

"Very seldom unless we're after some specific piece of information which is hinted at, pretty definitely pinpointed as to date, but not fully explained in the printed and tri-di library records. Then we dig into them. Of course we could bring the original depositor back to the Bank, temporarily yank out a later hunk of his memory, substitute the old one we wanted to scan and let him use his own index, which he still retains unimpaired. That's quick and certain but it causes psychological and physiological shock. Repeated too often it leads to the madness or death of the depositor."

"There's no other way?" He felt sick.

"Oh," she shrugged, "it is possible to set the deposit record just at the level of consciousness of the investigator and let him listen while doing other work. That technique suppresses the inconsequential stream-of-consciousness stuff but allows the peaks—when the brain is doing constructive thinking—to attract the attention of the scanner. I've used that method in an emergency but I've had to take a long rest afterward to avoid a nervous breakdown."

"Then the interest paid on deposits . . . ?"

"Just a fiction to insure prompt deposits and keep depositors happy."

"So the Bank is completely useless."

"It has kept people from dying," she said quietly. "Also I think, though I can't prove it, that it has gradually enlarged Centaurans brain capacity. Our memories go back only a century but our retentiveness may extend over a millenium. Even though I, for example, do not actually remember nine-tenths of the experiences I have had, the skills and other things I have forgotten may continue to mould my thinking and my unconscious acts.

"And, of course, there's always the faint possibility that I may be able to invent an index for the Bank. That would throw open all the knowledge of a thousand years to us. Surely then we could find a way of stopping those awful troglodytes from Omega.

"Can you find an index in three months, Marian?" For once he pitied her as she bowed her head and tears dropped on her folded hands.

"I have an idea," he said at last. "Let me try. I have a fresh viewpoint. Oh no, not the index—that is beyond my powers. But perhaps I might hit on a method for building some sort of radiation screen. Once we had that we could hold off the barbs indefinitely. We could throw it around our ships or our cities . . ."

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"A radiation *screen?*" Her eyes brightened at this challenge. "That is a contradiction in terms, Merek. It's like speaking of a black white.

"Perhaps a black white would be a grey," he argued. "It's worth trying."

"It has been tried." She shrugged. "For hundreds of years by our best minds."

"I have another idea." He grinned.

"Yes?" She leaned toward him, conconsciously tempting.

"Let's order a bottle of Scopio, some soda and ice, and have several stiff drinks."

"Scopio?" she frowned. "Oh no—alcohol dulls my thinking. Although"—she touched a button—"there's no reason why you shouldn't have a drink."

XIII

WEEKS of heartbreaking work followed but Merek's screen and Marian's index remained as unattainable as ever. Both admiral and secretary grew thin and wan but they refused to give up although the odds against them were millions to one.

Then, when Merek was at the breaking point, he received a call from the hospital. Iskra was well enough to be taken to his home to convalesce. She was only a shell of her former self, drawn, pale, antiseptically clean, bitter because the doctors had told her that her right arm probably would remain stiff for the rest of her life.

Iskra showed interest when he took her sightseeing in Mercon City. She viewed it from the same vantage point as a butcher examining the carcass of a fat steer! But Merekton left her cold.

"Merek folk like ghost," she complained after a day or two of it. "Iskra 'ear mind go 'blah, blah, blah,' roun' an' roun'. Walk roun' dead."

"Me too?"

"Oh no." She patted his hand. "Merek mind go zit, zit, zit like sword dat miss." And then she reminded him of her telepathic powers by adding, "Lis'en too much to ol' book. Talk too much, mebbe so, to Marian."

"Oh." He turned red under her steady gaze.

"Dat aw ri'." She looked away quickly. "Marian plenty smart, like Merek. Iskra no goo' now. Arm stiff. No fight any mo'."

"Nonsense," he tried to laugh. "Come on over to the rest home. The boys are dying to see you."

She cheered up at the rousing reception she received from the sailors, all of whom were on their feet now and chafing at their enforced inaction. After that she spent most of her waking hours with them, avoiding Merek except at mealtime. As she became strong she also made many visits to the reservation with the sailors. Like them, she seemed far more at home with the refugees than she did with any member of the Merek clan except young Matilda.

"Whatever do you see in that creature?" said Merek's mother one day. "She scandalizes the family by running around in that awful kilt. And yesterday I caught her out in the kitchen, eating with her *fingers!*"

"Oh, mother," said Matilda crossly. "She's really awfully nice. And she can read your mind so you'd better not even think things like that."

"Iskra's a splendid young animal, of course," said Merek, Sr.—who had an eye for the ladies, "but not your type, son. Not your type at all."

Whereupon Merek found it necessary to make another hurried trip to the Capital. On his final visit Marian forgot her principles and had one drink with him.

"Nothing can be done," she said as she traced geometric designs with a slim gold fingertip in the dew on her glass.

"Nothing," he answered glumly. "Today I wandered through the city, talking to passers-by. There's no heart in them. They won't fight with our present set-up. And even if we did find the screen or the index now there's no time to use them. The truce has only a month

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more to run."

"I had a dream last night," she said. "Death came into this room in a black robe, asking a ransom for Mercon. You seized him by the throat. He flapped about like a big bird, snapping his teeth at you. Finally you let him go. You couldn't choke him. Death doesn't breathe." She shuddered, finished her drink and added, "Franklin wants you to stand by with the Alpha to take him to Omega to sign our formal surrender."

"Let Mendez do it. I will not go."

"Why?" The word was a whisper.

"He always has been an ambassador to other systems, hasn't he?"

"Yes." Marian made circles on the table top with the wet bottom of her glass. "Mendez made our very first treaty with the Siriuns. Later he reestablished contact with the barbarians and opened up Omega for trade—worse luck."

"What's the real truth behind that Siriun treaty?" Merek poured another drink. "History says it was a great thing for us."

"It was a face-saving compromise." Her voice was bitter. "The Siriuns caused us a great deal of trouble in the first half-millenium, you know. Their ships tried to turn us back when we were halfway out from Earth."

"I never could understand how we held out against those invisible devils."

"The old Tellus, which we captured from the oligarchs, was an interplanetary liner which our technicians converted for deep-space travel. She was armed only with mines and short-range cannon. The Siriun ships that intercepted her seemed no better armed but they confused our pilots by some sort of telepathic broadcasting.

"Franklin dreamed up a counter-weapon, put it in a lifeboat and went out on a suicide mission. The boat was shot to pieces. Franklin was the only crew member rescued but he was badly wounded. When he recovered he could not remember how the weapon had been made. I have gone over his first deposit many times. When it reaches that point the recording blanks out. Strange . . ."

"Yet the weapon must have been potent," said Merek. "The Siriuns kept their distance after that."

SHE agreed. "Yes, for a time. The Tellus reached Pizar. Later we colonized all the Centauran planets. But whenever we tried to expand beyond this system the Siriuns managed to block us.

"When the barbarians finally broke through from dying Earth the situation became tense again. The Siriuns had learned to tolerate us but they seemed to be in deadly fear of the barbs. Wanted them exterminated."

"Perhaps," said Merek thoughtfully, "it was because the atomic radiations of the endless Terran wars had mutated the barbs until they were on the verge of learning how to use telepathy as a weapon like the Siriuns."

"Perhaps." She held out her glass absentmindedly, "although how those creatures . . ."

"That reminds me," he interrupted. "Why aren't the refugees telepathic? They stayed on Earth until only a few months before the final blowup."

"The refugees kill all mutations at birth."

"Those gentle people?" Merek thought of Captain McCarthy and his sweet daughter.

"It's part of their religion, philosophy or whatever you call it. They consider it no sin to do away with changelings—to preserve the old ways."

"Hmmm. But we were talking of the first Siriun treaty."

"Oh yes. Well, in the early days Centauran ships made repeated attempts to investigate the Dark Planet. They never returned. No, one did manage to get back with half its crew turned gibbering idiots. The pilot told a wild yarn about losing his way when the tritium tubes cut out.

"Anyway, when we welcomed the bar-

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barians the Siriuns sent orders for one of our ships to come to their hideout and negotiate a treaty. Mendez volunteered for the mission. He came back with the treaty, such as it was. But when we tried to find out what had happened out there his mind—and his deposit too—were jittery blanks, just like Franklin's. Even after this last trip out—the one you were on—he came back on the verge of a complete breakdown, the Bank reports."

"I know." Merek was trying desperately to think his way through this maze of contradictions. "But that treaty—what were its provisions?"

"We were to limit the populations of the three planets, stop trying to colonize other systems and expel the barbarians. In return, the Siriuns would leave us in peace and trade with us. Come to think of it"—Marian looked at him oddly—"the Centauran doldrums might be said to date from that treaty."

"You can't have progress and maintain the status quo at the same time." Merek shrugged. "Well, it's only fair to let Mendez finish what he started, by taking Franklin to Omega." He hesitated and then rushed on. "With your permission, Intelligence, I want to leave this system before the barbs come. There's really nothing more I can do here. And my men fought too well and are too loyal to become slaves. We may be able to found a colony on some distant planet."

"That doesn't sound like you." She finished her drink and made a face over it.

"I know," he said miserably. "But can you suggest an alternative?"

Marian stared at her toes for a while, then shook her bright head.

"Why don't you come with us?"

"Oh no!" She kept her eyes lowered. "My duty is here."

"*What* duty? This civilization is dying. Your duty is to help build another."

She rose and paced the room, studying the hundred panels of her calculators as though seeking an answer among their inscrutable tubes. "What about that barbarian wench?" she astounded him by saying at last.

"I-Iskra?" He hated himself for stammering. "What has she to do . . . ? Why, we're just blood brothers—I mean, we saved each other's lives. That's all."

"*All*, Merek?"

"Confound it!" He jumped up and gripped her smooth shoulders to stop that eternal pacing. "Iskra is not quite human. Mutation, you know. Let me—"

"Human enough!" Marian's firm chin went up. "You just want to use my brain in starting your colony." Tears formed and she dashed them away. "Oh, why did I drink that awful Scopio? I'm all confused. But I think"—she threw back her head—"that you should bring this Asta—is that her name—here to see me before we discuss this matter further. You may go now!"

Merek approached the meeting between the two women with fear such as he had never felt when facing barbarian guns. He scrubbed Iskra until her bronzed hide turned pink. He brushed the tangles out of her curls while she fidgeted and swore. He even enticed her to use some of the perfume that was fashionable that year. But when he brought one of Mathilda's loveliest gowns she flatly refused to put it on, although she fingered the shining fabric wistfully.

"Iskra warrior. Wear kilt!" she said flatly.

"At least let me have the damned thing cleaned."

"Aw ri!" She hurled the motheaten excuse for a garment at him. He thought he heard her giggle as the door irised shut behind him.

HE EXPECTED an explosion when his "blood brudder" strutted into Marian's office without touching fingers to forehead as was the Centauran custom. The secretary turned white but said nothing. Clumsily—her arm hung stiffly—the battlescarred veteran hitched herself to the top of Marian's

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desk, swung her heels and fished in her pockets.

"Marian 'ave gun?" She proffered a battered stick.

Merek held his breath.

"Thank you, my good girl." The Secretary accepted the peace offering but did not unwrap it. "I suppose Admiral Merek has told you he intends to emigrate."

"Yah." Iskra nodded. "Merek big foo'."

"And has he told you he wants me to go with him?" If Marian had been a cat she would have licked her chops at this point.

"Yah. Dat aw ri'." She blinked her eyes in an unwarriorlike manner. "Iskra no goo'. Sword-arm stiff." She demonstrated.

"I didn't mean it that way." Marian's face turned scarlet.

"Mind mean it."

"Why am I a fool for wanting to leave?" Merek interposed.

"Jus' talk," she answered with a slow wink. "Merek no quit."

"But we can't win."

"No lick Rolphson," she agreed with pride. "Lick Siriun, mebbe so."

"How?" Marian leaned forward tensely. Although she abominated all barbarians and outwardly scorned them, she would not have remained Secretary had she really been so small as to ignore their telepathic and other gifts. "How, Asta?"

"Name Iskra. Sub-chief Rabbit Clan!" The girl's composure was ruffled.

"Excuse me, Chief Iskra." In her eagerness Marian was almost humble. "You mean, I suppose, that the inhabitants of Sirius' Dark Planet are the real enemies of both our peoples. But their civilization is so superior to ours that—"

"Hah!" Iskra spat on the shining floor.

"Well, isn't it?"

"Siriun know 'ow throw big scare. Dat aw. Franklin mos' lick Siriun once. Centauran 'elp. Barb 'elp. Refugee 'elp. Lick goo' dis ti."

"How did you know about Franklin's weapon?" Marian was really shaken now.

"Read in mind."

"Do you know how the weapon was made?"

"No—but Bank know."

"It doesn't," Marian sighed. "I've searched the deposits. They go blank when I reach that period. The bank actually jitters. Acts as if it had had a nervous breakdown." She was treating the barbarian as an equal.

"No matter." Iskra shrugged her good shoulder. "Bank show Centauran 'ow to be brave—fight goo'!"

"How on Mercon could the Bank show people how to be brave, child?"

"No child! Big girl!"

"All right, all right," Merek cut in. "If you have any ideas explain them."

" 'Ard say in silly word," she frowned. "Wait—Iskra try talk big, like Centauran. Den mebbe so Marian, Merek understan'." Her eyes slitted in concentration.

Eventually she resumed in halting but almost perfect English, "Ol' book—the old books that Rolph read talked a great deal about the 'dead hand of the past.' They said too much reliance on tradition makes people rigid and conservative so they do not change and grow.

"On the other hand, there are people like you Centaurans who despise tradition and have no real interest in their past. They become decadent and weak. But, the books said, there is also a 'living hand of the past,' the great memories which make men proud to be men—willing to fight to the death rather than become slaves. The barbarians—and the refugees—pass along those great memories from generation to generation in stories and folksongs. But the Centaurans . . ."

"Just stuff them in the Bank and forget them," Marian agreed. "But what is the alternative? No human brain can encompass a thousand years of memories."

"No need to." Iskra was growing im-

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patient. "Just keep the high spots. Leave all the rest in the Bank but give back to their owners the proud thoughts —the ones that make men fight for liberty."

"Impossible!" Marian pressed a hand to her lips. "And yet . . ." She began pacing like her old dynamic self. "We'll use an electronic relay to screen out or suppress the drivel. We'll return what is left to the Depositors. Mendez will forget he bought a new uniform three months ago. But he'll remember how *and why* he led that suicide charge against the aborignes nine hundred years ago. Oh, wonderful! We'll be like gods. *"Here!"* She snatched a plascript pad and wrote equations like mad. "This should do it. How stupid we have been!"

"Still stupid," said Iskra, looking over the secretary's shoulder and dropping back into patois to express her disgust. "No work *dat* way."

"Of course it will!" Imperious once more, now that she had a lead, Marian brushed the objection aside. "You and Merek run along like good children and let me work this out."

Merek ventured a protest. He might have been speaking to a deaf woman.

"Why do you think her approach won't work?" he asked after they had tiptoed out.

"Doctor no can cure self!" She shook her curls angrily.

"Why are you trying to help us!" he puzzled. "If Marian's plan does work your people have no chance of invading the Centauran planets. Nothing will stand against us."

"Better barb no come 'ere," she answered slowly. "No ready live long ti' yet. Mus' stay Omega. Be 'appy dere if Dark no come 'gain."

"Umm. And if it doesn't work?"

"Dark come Mercon, mebbe so." She shivered as she paced down the marble steps. "Iskra, Merek go 'ome now. Sit in sun."

"You don't think too much of Marian, do you?" he prodded.

"Sweet girl," she yawned. Then, with renewed eagerness as she pointed to a shining emporium across the grassy street, "Take Iskra to store. Buy pretty thing."

THEY returned to Merekton laden with purchases, mostly junk jewelry and other gewgaws with which Iskra delighted in decking her naked person to the scandal of all Mereks. Then for several days they loafed in the sun as she had suggested, swam under the trailing willows and paid a number of visits to the reservation.

Iskra had taken a tremendous liking to Sharon McCarthy and was doing everything in her power to forward Pancrief's romance. One of the ways in which she accomplished this was to engage in lengthy and sometimes bitter arguments with Captain McCarthy over the merits and demerits of non-resistance, thereby giving Sharon and the lean Pizarian a chance to wander off, hand-in-hand.

"Must resist evil," was the nub of her argument which the old man could not quite dodge. "Must fight evil to death."

"But people are not evil," he would plead as they foregathered with Merek under the trees on the square while scores of old folk and children gathered around to listen and sometimes to inject arguments of their own.

"Neither are machines," she would counter. She never used verbal shorthand when talking to the completely non-telepathic refugees. "So why fight machines. They are only tools made by people whom you say are good.

"Evil thoughts destroyed Earth," Iskra would insist. "Good Earth people fought other good Earth people. They never bothered to stamp out the thoughts that made good people hate each other—or to wonder where those thoughts came from."

"You barbarians just like to fight for the fun of it," the captain might snarl at this point.

Or he might fly into a senile rage if Sharon happened to be nearby and

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said. "There's something to Iskra's argument, father. Non-resistance didn't save Earth."

"Only a few thousand of us refugees-to-be tried it," he would thunder.

"And where are we now? Living on a reservation as the Indians used to. That is not life."

Whereupon the captain would stomp off to his cabin in a pet and his daughter would take his place. "There *are* evil people, I think," she ventured once while the onlookers shook their heads in silent reproof. "Evil people are those who think all other people are evil."

"That doesn't make sense, Sharon," Pancrief objected. "You are defining evil in terms of itself."

"I'm just a girl," she answered, "but I have talked a great deal with father, who is foolish only when he gets to feeling old. Once he told me there are just two classes of people—those who hold that men, with a few shining exceptions, are all evil—and those who believe that men, with a few shameful exceptions, are pretty decent.

"I'll go a step farther. I'll agree with Iskra to this extent—the few evil men should be fought, conquered and put somewhere where they cannot corrupt good men." She sprang to her feet. "I must see that father gets undressed and to bed." Extending a hand to Iskra she added, "Come again, please. I like you barbarians better than the Merconians. I can understand you."

"What about Pizarians?" Pancrief asked.

"Oh, you are barbarous enough so I can understand about half of what you say."

"Which half?"

"The half in which you make love to me," she whispered in his ear before she ran after her grandfather.

"Sharon smart," Iskra said as they walked back to Merekton under the stars. "Refugee no stay on reservation if Sharon chief."

"You said once the refugees might be able to help us against Sirius," Merek recalled. "How could they do that?"

"Barbarian telepath," she answered slowly. "Siriun better telepath. Twist barb mind in knot. Killum, even. Centauran telepath li'l bit. Siriun no kill Centauran. Jus' mix up thought. Make-um weak—like back on Earth, mebbe so."

"You mean," shouted Merek, "that it may have been Siriun tinkering with our minds which caused the final wars back home?"

"W'y not?" She shrugged. "Mebbe dat w'y refugee keep mind shut. Kill mutation. Stay sane dat way. Siriun no can touch."

"So, if the refugees could get over their phobia against machinery they could pilot a ship right to the Dark Planet instead of going to pieces the way any of us would if we tried to go there without permission?" This from Pancrief.

"Yah. Refugee come Mercon in ship."

"Fact is," said Merek, "they almost worship that old wreck on the common despite their hatred of other machines. Look into this, Pan. Iskra has something."

The admiral forgot all about that conversation when he reached home. Waiting for him was a message from Marian which read, *Demonstrating suppressor to Council tomorrow at 800. Attend with Iskra.*

XIV

AFTER some trouble about passes they entered the heavily guarded Council Chamber. On hospital beds in front of the platinum rail lay four still figures, they heads encircled by encephalographic helmets of a new and complicated design. Cables ran from each helmet to an outlet connecting it with the proper Memory Bank channel. A doctor and two armed guards watched over the sleepers.

Merek saw with a sort of horor that Marian occupied the first bed. She looked small and somehow unfinished

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because the helmet hid her hair and part of her face. His amazement grew when he realized that the second cot was filled by Mendez' hulking form. Cots three and four held a man and a woman he did not know.

Seated under the ever-changing mural the Council members leaned forward tensely, listening to President Franklin. He evidently had been speaking in camera for some time.

"To sum up," the young-old man was saying, "Her Intelligence perfected a suppressor relay that responds to every thought of a Bank depositor—withdrawer would be a more accurate word in this case. Any—ah—client must have his brain wiped clean of all memories. He is then ready to receive impressions, either new or old.

"The new helmet is placed on his head. His own deposits, beginning with the earliest years of his life and ending with the latest, are played into the blank section of his brain from the panels where they previously had been placed for safekeeping. Thus he reviews his past experiences, beginning with his first memories as an infant or even those in the months between conception and birth.

"But since, under Marian's new system, the withdrawer is fully conscious and in control of the suppressor relay, he need no longer overload his cortex by reliving every moment of his past life. He lets the 'clutch' of the recording slip, as Her Intelligence explained it to me, until it brings to light some event which profoundly affected his development. He reimpresses this incident on his mind, lets the record race until another peak is reached, records again and so continues until he has regained all the key recollections of his lifetime."

"How long does the process require?" asked Poynetz, the sour-faced philosopher, "and why was the full Council not consulted before its Secretary was allowed to participate in this—dubious experiment?"

"The entire re-recording requires twelve hours or less, depending upon the age of the client and therefore the mass of material to be scanned," Franklin answered. "The experiment, as you call it, was begun yesterday. In view of the emergency which has arisen there was no chance to assemble the Council.

"You mean the new ultimatum from Rolphson?" Councillor Anthony of Arcon inquired.

"Exactly. The emperor suspects there is something in the wind. He warns us his fleet will attack unless we surrender within the week. It was under those circumstances that Admiral Mendez volunteered to undergo treatment. He hopes it will enable him to remember long-forgotten campaigns and strategies. Our fleet is ready to depart at once if the—experiment—is successful."

"And Marian?" someone asked.

"I know." Franklin bowed his head. "If anything goes wrong we may be in serious trouble without her great wisdom. I tried to argue her out of being first to test the suppresor. She insisted. I had no power to forbid her."

"And the other two—victims?" That was Poynetz again.

"They are an average citizen and his wife who is volunteering to act as controls."

"Your Intelligences!" cried the doctor. "Admiral Mendez is rousing."

Mendez yawned, stretched, waited calmly for the helmet to be removed, sat up and scratched his barrel chest. "Wonderful! *Wonderful!*" He saluted the Council. "A revelation. Remember every worthwhile incident in my entire naval career. Now let the barbs try anything!" His hooded eyes, clear as those of a young hawk, stared through Merek for a long moment. Without returning the other's salute Mendez bent over Marian, who was beginning to stir.

THE Secretary rose briskly as soon as the helmet was off. "I know how to build my Bank index now," she said.

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"Have the main calculator cleared! I begin work at once. The index must be built on Beacon or one of Arcon's moons because of its tremendous size." She faced the Council imperiously.

"Drop all other work. This matter will require your individual attention for the next five years." Suddenly she wavered and grasped the rail for support. "Need all the calculators," she mumbled. "Five thousand technicians. I. . ." She passed a hand over her face in the old uncertain gesture.

"*Marian!*" Merek shook her gently. "Wake up."

"Who are you, sir?" The words flicked like a lash as she recovered herself.

"Merek," he stammered as those great eyes studied him without recognition. "Admiral Merek."

"Nonsense. Admiral Mendez commands the Centauran fleet. What have you done with my husband?"

"Here I am, dear." Mendez slipped his arm around her rigid shoulders. To the astounded Council he added. "Don't worry. She'll be all right in a few hours. Quite a shock, you know. Let me handle her." He started leading her from the room.

"Merek stop Mendez!" Iskra gasped. "Mendez aw bad now! *Quick!*"

Merek pushed forward. An over-officious guard barred his way. Before he could be placated the admiral was at the door. Merek started to follow but Franklin, not understanding what was going on, hammered with his gavel.

"Admiral Merek," he thundered. "The Council has not dismissed you."

Merek gave it up. Placing his wrist communicator to his lips he called Pancrief on their private channel. "Get the crew to battle stations," he commanded when the other came in. "Take the Terra up a mile or so and stand by for others—*my* orders. Trouble's brewing here, I think. Over."

"Roger. Have fun," came the answer.

The last two sleepers were sitting up now. The woman spoke first. "Married to a nincompoop!" she snarled as she stared across the beds at her weak-chinned blinking husband. "I, who was once the toast of Mercon—I, who thrilled millions with my dancing in the early days—I, who have had a planetary governor as a lover and a Councillor as a husband! To have sunk so low! Oh, shame. *Shame!*" Sobbing wildly, she ran out of the room.

"What a fool I have been, Your Intelligences," the man said when she had gone. "For almost a thousand years I have been running frantically about, seeking new sensations, experiences, adventures, women, wealth, beauty and excitement. I have neglected every worthwhile pursuit to do these senseless things because never until now have I known enough to realize that all the time—what I really sought was—*this!*"

Swift as a snake, he snatched an automatic from the holster of a nearby guard, plazed the muzzle to his temple and pressed the trigger.

"Now," sneered Poynetz when the dead man had been carried out and the hubbub subsided, "perhaps our Honorable President can explain this debacle."

"Theoretically. . ." Franklin ran his fingers through snowy hair. "Theoretically the suppressor relay should have worked. I checked all of Marian's equations and plans. I have no idea what went wrong. Can anyone hazard a guess?"

"Iskra can." She strode forward nonchalantly, hands deep in the pockets of her kilt. She perched herself on the platinum rail, hooked bare toes around its graceful supports and rummaged for gum.

"Is this the barbarian you captured, Admiral Merek?" Franklin demanded.

"More or less. It would be wise to listen to her, Your Intelligence."

"Suppressor work fine," Iskra grinned at them. "Centauran mind no work."

"What's this all about?" shouted a Councillor.

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"Iskra blood brudder to Merek," she began explaining as though to a group of children. "Try be friend aw Centauran. Tell Marian if Centauran get pride back an' 'member 'ow fight can make alliance wit' Rolphson. Lick Siriun."

"So she practically told Marian how to make the suppressor," Merek snapped. He had begun to suspect that Iskra was a fifth columnist, deliberately bent on Centauran defeat. "And look what happened."

"Marian no let Iskra say one thing." She looked at him sadly as she read his thoughts. "No goo' 'ave relay on suppressor worked by withdrawer from Bank. If withdrawer well-rounded person, come back, mebbe so, wit' big well-rounded memory. But if one-track mind like Marian, 'oo spend thousand year hunt Bank index, come back, think only of index. If vain woman, 'member only vain thing. If 'ave suicide complex, understand. Shoot self quick."

"And if the withdrawer should be Mendez—" Merek choked on the developing thought—"with an overwhelming ambition, a thousand years of military experience and a passionate craving for Marian. . ."

"Yah!" Iskra chewed her gum thoughtfully, eyes on some faraway scene. "Den Mendez think Centauran done for. Kidnap Marian. Go spaceport. Take up fleet. Go join Rolphson!"

PANDEMONIUM broke loose in the chamber. Communicator screens flared to confirm the fact that the fleet already was taking the air. Orders were shouted to be immediately countermanded. Attendants and guards ran hither and yon like rabbits before they vanished. A number of august councillors caught the infection and fled, white robes flapping. A world was ending!

Eventually only Franklin and Poynetz sat huddled on the dais amidst a shambles of overturned and broken chairs, facing Iskra and Merek outside the railing.

"I suppose," the philosopher gritted as he switched off the useless communicator, "that this woman should be arrested as a saboteur."

"Iskra try tell Franklin w'en Mendez leave wit' Marian."

"Yes, yes—that's true," the President admitted and added pathetically, "Perhaps you will intervene for us with Rolphson when he lands."

"No goo'," she answered calmly. "If Rolphson land Sirium send Dark. Make barb, Centauran go mad. Kill. Kill till none left. Den Dark Planet rule galaxy."

"Then there is no hope," said Poynetz.

"One—two—t'ree 'ope." She held up as many lean fingers. "Mebbe so fo'. Throw dice ri', still can win."

"How? *How?*" they clamored at her.

"One," she said, turning down a finger, "Merek 'ave ship wit' superdrive in air. Two,"—she repeated the gesture—"ship can get to Beacon 'fore Mendez. Make alliance wit' Rolphson. T'ree; 'ave refugee. Siriun no can 'urt 'em. Mebbe so guide barb fleet to Dark Planet. Fo', still can make Bank give back proud memory—tell 'ow Franklin almos' lick Siriun once."

"No time to try that again," said the President.

"Plenty ti'," she said firmly. "Iskra show." She hopped from her perch, picked up one of the headsets, stood a long moment as though listening, then, despite her stiff arm, began readjusting the wiring and relays with hands as deft as those of a technician.

"Dere!" she said, presenting the helmet to Franklin. "Put on. Scan Bank deposit."

"Are you crazy, man?" Poynetz cried as the President made a motion as if to obey. "What do we know about this wretched girl? She is probably a spy. Don't touch that thing. It's a proven failure!"

"Poynetz!" Iskra commanded. "Look at me." Reluctantly he did so. "Look in Iskra mind!" The philosopher's wi-

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zened face twisted into a knot as he fought to disobey. Then he sighed and relaxed.

Although Iskra's thoughts were directed at the philosopher both Merek and Franklin sensed their general import. They were not brutal nor specific. They did not scratch the brain like rusty needles but soothed it like healing fingers.

"What are you? A superwoman?" Poynetz breathed at last.

"Girl!" She frowned. Then to Franklin, "Put on. No 'urt. No take long."

The President did her bidding and switched into his Bank channel.

Then something happened which Merek was never afterward able to describe properly. It was as though a clock or a tri-di film were being run backward. It was as though a butterfly were emerging from a cocoon. It was like Ponce de Leon sighting the fountain of youth. It was like all of those things and like none of them!

Outside the Capitol the sounds of mob hysteria began as the news of Mendez' defection leaked out. It mounted as the minutes and hours passed but inside the hushed chamber Iskra, Merek and Poynetz sat enthralled, watching the weariness of a thousand years pass from Franklin's face.

He did not become physically younger. His hair remained white and the wrinkles did not disappear. But as time passed his chin went up and his shoulders straightened. He breathed deeper. Color came into cheeks which had been like parchment. Instead of being an old old man in a younger man's body he became a young man in a body grown prematurely old.

Iskra watched the controls closely, with occasional glances at the big clock above the mural. At last she disconnected the helmet and put it aside. "'Ow Franklin feel?" she asked.

"Fine!" He stood up and stretched until his muscles cracked. Then he frowned. "Who are you? What's going on here? And what room is this? I didn't know we had built anything so pretentious." He started as he caught sight of his fellow Councillor. "Ah, Poynetz! I thought you were out chasing aborigines."

"Uh—I—" Poynetz shot a look full of venom at Iskra.

"President Franklin," said the girl, looking steadily at the patriarch, "there is much to explain and little time to explain it. You understand the principle of the Memory Bank?"

"I had a hand in inventing it, young woman."

"When were the first units installed?"

"Any schoolgirl knows that—in twenty seventy-five, the seventy-third year after our landing on Pizar."

"What year is this?"

"Why, twenty eighty-one, of course."

"This is three thousand, two, almost a thousand years after that landing."

"Nonsense!" He was growing angry. "Who are you, anyway, wearing those outrageous clothes—or lack of them?"

She merely looked at him. His angry frown changed to one of puzzlement, finally to stunned acceptance.

"I believe you are telling the truth," he said at last. "But I am not sufficiently telepathic to read your thoughts clearly. Put them in words."

XVI

SHE outlined the situation. The collapse of Centauran morale and defense . . . the failure of Marian's suppressor . . . Mendez's defection . . . their desperate dream of striking at the Siriuns to cut the Gordian knot which was strangling humanity.

"To me, this is still the year twenty eighty-one," Franklin groaned when she finished. "I am approaching my one hundredth birthday and preparing to make my first Bank deposit. The aborigines on Arcon are in revolt. We think Sirius is supplying them with arms. Poynetz—" He turned to his friendly enemy with outstretched hands—"Isn't

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—wasn't that the way things were?"

"I don't remember," stammered the philosopher. "My early memories are buried in score upon score of Bank panels."

"And my memories of later days?" Franklin asked.

"They too are deposited in the Bank," said Iskra. "You may study them later. Perhaps that is the proper use for Marian's suppressor. But now we want you to tell us what sort of weapon was employed against the Siriuns when you made that foray in the lifeboat."

"Oh—that!" The President's eyes closed in concentration. For perhaps five minutes he sat rigid. Then he sighed and shook his head. "I can't remember," he admitted bleakly. "It was —it was something that struck at some weakness we surmised the Siriuns had. There was no time to complete it on board the Tellus. She was beginning to slide off the route to Centaurus despite everything we could do. We loaded the pieces on the lifeboat and assembled them as we headed for the enemy fleet."

"Why didn't your boat slide off course too?" Merek asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps because the foray was organized on the spur of the moment and the Siriuns were caught by surprise. Anyway, while I was bending over our weapon a rapidly rotating part of it broke. I was struck on the temple —here!—" He showed them the ancient scar just above his hairline. "When I regained consciousness I was in the hospital aboard the Tellus.

"They told me—but you know all that —that my companions must have got the weapon working after I was knocked out—that it must have thrown a scare into the Siriuns because they kept such a distance from us after that that their telepathing broadcasting was ineffective—that the lifeboat ran into a floating mine and was totally destroyed —that I must have been put in a spacesuit and cast adrift, possibly when the others saw that a collision was inevitable.

"Ever since," he concluded lamely, "I have tried to recall what that weapon was—and always I have failed. It is as though a dark curtain had fallen."

"Siriun devil trick." Iskra dropped back into the vernacular in her excitement. "Set up circular neuronic path in brain. Memory no los'. Jus' bury."

Poynetz was on his feet, shaking like a leaf. "*Hypnotism!*" he shouted. "Why did I never think of it? We must try to reach Franklin's unconscious!" He scrabbled in a satchel a fleeing psychiatrist-councillor had left behind, came up with a gadget of bright lights and revolving mirrors.

"Wait," said Merek. "President Franklin has just been through a very trying experience. "Do you think this is wise?"

"*Now!*" said Iskra. "Too late w'en Mendez join Rolphson."

"Shoot, Poynetz," said Franklin. "This is the first original idea you have had since the pigs ate grandpa." He relaxed and stared into the spinning hypnotizer.

"Arthur Franklin," said the philosopher when the patriarch was asleep. "Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," came the toneless reply.

"Think back to the hour when your lifeboat left the Tellus to make contact with the Siriun navy. Tell me exactly what happened."

"Hank, Tom, Will and I are putting equipment aboard the boat," Franklin began in a muffled voice. "We have to act at once. The Siriuns have given the Tellus five hours to start decelerating or undergo what they call a mental bombardment of the first order. Hank thinks we can complete the weapon as we go out.

"We're aboard the boat now. It is expelled from its cradle. Tom is warming up the drive. We're moving toward the enemy fleet at the speed of the Tellus plus our own. Should make contact in twelve hours. Meantime we have much work to do." He lapsed into silence.

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"Think forward to the time when you and the others are working over the weapon," Poynetz commanded. "Here's a plascript and stylus. Sketch the parts and circuits of your weapon."

Franklin's eyes remained closed but he took the stylus and began sketching. "Can't show the completed machine yet," he said dreamily. "Hank designed the tuner. He's attaching it now. Looks like this." The stylus raced. "It revolves at tremendous speed. . . Hank is making the last connections on the printed circuit—here—and here." His hands were shaking. "This means life or death to all of us. Hank's lighting a cigarette before he flips the switch."

"Ask him the purpose of the weapon," Merek whispered.

"Why, it's so simple I can't understand why we didn't think of it before," Franklin answered when the question had been relayed. "It's just an ultra-microwave transmitter which—*wait!*" His voice broke with excitement. "Hank has his nerves under control now. He's going to turn on the—*ohhh!*"

THE president's voice rose to a scream of agony. He clapped both hands to his head, then toppled from his chair, unconscious. When Iskra and the others rushed to his aid they found blood oozing from that old wound on his left temple.

"My fault," mourned Poynetz. "I should have asked that question first."

"Can we revive him and try again?" Merek asked as he worked over the fallen man.

"I'm afraid not." Poynetz gnawed his lips. "There's a complete block. It would take weeks or months of treatment to break it down without killing him." He turned to Iskra. "Can you make out the purpose of the weapon he sketched?"

The girl shook her head. "Could make machine," she said as she helped the others make Franklin as comfortable as possible on one of the cots. "Try out. See w'at 'appen. Like 'aving weapon to kill fee but no know fee live."

"We know a little more than that," said Poynetz. "We know that if it is tuned correctly it does something rough to Siriuns."

"I suggest you get several technicians to work on this, Your Intelligence," Merek proposed.

"If the techs haven't all run away." Poynetz pushed a button. Eventually a frightened little man scurried into the room, looked over the sketches, listened to their explanations, nodded his head doubtfully and scurried out with the plasscript.

"I'm convinced the answer is just within our grasp," Merek raged as Poynetz pushed other buttons that brought a doctor and a nurse to attend Franklin. "All of these deposits available—" he swept an arm toward the shining panels ranged along one wall of the chamber—"and nothing comes out of them. Poynetz, you are the Council now. What do you suggest?"

"I think"—the philosopher placed his finger tips carefully together—"that the Bank—it was in quite a primitive state at that time, remember—must have received some sort of shock which blanked all its records for the period we are searching. Electronic brains, just like those of humans, are subject to nervous breakdowns when presented with insoluble problems or contradictory orders."

"Who could have given contradictory orders which would have sent the Bank into a tail spin?" Merek demanded.

"In those early days—in fact, up until the last few hundred years when the system became so complicated that authority had to be delegated to a Bank Authority, the entire project was controlled by the Council," Poynetz answered.

"No one else?"

"Well, I seem to have read that during the period when the first treaty with Sirius was being negotiated and ratified, Admiral Mendez was made an ex-

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officio Council member."

"Mendez!" Merek grinned like a wolf. "Are his deposits available?"

Poynetz nodded to a series of gently glowing panels to the left of the dais.

Merek slapped a standard research helmet on his head, adjusted the suppressor circuit, plugged it on a hunch into Mendez's panel bearing the numerals 2520-2530. . . and merged completely and at once with the mentality of his former superior officer. Merged but was not submerged—he was still Merek listening to another's thoughts.

To his utter astonishment he found that Mendez had a likeable mentality—vigorous, patriotic and with a healthy sense of humor—not in the least like the martinet he knew and despised.

At breakneck speed he skimmed through the events leading up to Mendez's departure for Sirius. They were all there, as crystal clear as though he were remembering events in his own life.

In the admiral's stead he paced the bridge of the big ship during take-off from Mercon's spaceport.

He skipped the endless months as the ship, which had no hyperdrive, of course, drew nearer and nearer to the Dark Planet. He obeyed the sardonic telepathic instructions of his hosts to the letter as he lowered to a landing through 20 miles of dense fog. With Merek's lips, it seemed, Mendez gave orders for the opening of the main port. . .

And, after that order was issued, he remembered nothing more.

Oh, yes, the relays on Mendez's panel—he had seen them dimly as a sort of diaphanous background for the events he had been reliving—began flipping open and shut like mad. The mercury tubes of the circular memory channels danced with wavering lights. Eerie squeals, dregs of thoughts and supersonic whines filled his brain. But of what occurred after that port unscrewed he got not an inkling.

The next lucid—or semi-lucid—memory he could catch showed him, still as Mendez, issuing orders to lift the ship for its return journey.

BUT the Mendez into whose brain he now peered was subtly different from the devil-may-care fighter who had landed on the Dark Planet. There was a mordant cynicism in that mind. There was overwhelming ambition. There was the pride of a Lucifer.

"From now on. . ." The concept formed in his mind like smoke seeping through damp leaves heaped on a roaring bonfire. "From now on I, Mendez, am the arbiter of . . ." The thought was cut off as though by a mental knife.

Merek made a motion as though to rip off the helmet. He was farther from a solution than before. Then he hesitated. What had Poynetz said? " . . . the Bank must have received some sort of shock. Electronic brains, just like those of humans, are subject to nervous breakdowns."

And what do psychiatrists use to cure nervous breakdowns? Why they use shock—shock by electricity, drugs—even a hard slap in the face!

Waving away the questions Poynetz and Iskra were shouting at him, Merek reset the dials, returned Mendez to the moment when he had landed in Siriun territory. Then, as memory started to block out, he seized a chair and began smashing at the glowing panel. When the chair broke apart he beat the thing with his fists and kicked it again and again. Shock indeed! He would give the damned machine a shock it would never forget!

Inside his head—Mendez's head—something exploded. Merek fell to his knees. A rusty needle was scratching at his brain. Agony coursed like acid through his psyche.

"No!" Mendez was screaming. *"No!"* In the pitch darkness he scrabbled vainly for the control button which would have sealed the ship and sent his men to battle stations.

"Too late," the needle incised his wincing cortex. "We are inside now. Our

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superiors will not let you escape." Other needles took up the attack. Hell opened.

"*No!*" panted Mendez. But this time he meant, "Yes."

"That is better." The needle points withdrew ever so slightly. "Tell us. What was the weapon your people built on their little boat?"

"I don't know," the quivering husk of Mendez groaned. "Don't hurt me again."

"We won't hurt you. But we must alter you somewhat before we send you home with the treaty we have prepared. We must see that a small part of us remains always in your brain.

"*No!*" Mendez strained at the mental bonds which held him. "Not that. Not that!"

"You won't be hurt, miserable worm," cooed the needles. "*There!* That didn't hurt a bit, did it! Now open wider. . . There . . . And there! Perfect! A beautiful piece of surgery, isn't it, cousins?

"Forget now, Mendez. Stand up. Return to the bridge. Give the command for take off. Wrap your pink tentacles around this box. It contains the treaty. Ah, we're going to be good friends, aren't we all? We're going to establish the same control over Centaurus and Omega we exercised over Earth, aren't we? And we're going to tear the Memory Bank apart to find the secret of Franklin's weapon or, failing that, to be sure no human rediscovers it, aren't we Mendez?"

The needles gave a final emphatic dig and withdrew.

Shaking as with the palsy Merek tore the helmet from his head and hurled it into a far corner of the chamber.

"*Jackpot!*" he yelled crazily. "I hit the jackpot. Mendez has an incubus!"

He fainted.

XVI

MEREK revived to find Iskra holding his head in her lap while Poynetz chafed his wrists. Franklin, a bandage around his head, was bending over them. In the background hovered the little tech.

"Took hours to bring you around," said the philosopher. "What happened?"

He explained as best he could. "So now we know for sure," he summarized as he sat up groggily, "that it was Siriun plotting which set Earth's peoples at each other's throats. We also know, I think, that the Siriuns live in deadly fear of Franklin's gun." He groaned and held his splitting head in his hands. "Now our only hope is to build that gun and fiddle around with the tuning until something happens."

"I have built the weapon," interrupted the tech. "It is a very simple adaptation of a radar transmitter. Unfortunately it has a limited range—not over a thousand miles at the outside, I should say."

Merek began pacing the chamber as he had so often paced his cabin out on Sirius. Three steps forward—turn—three steps back.

"Iskra," he said at last, "where is Mendez now?"

"Fleet circle 'bout five hundred miles up. Leave fo' Beacon soon."

"Can you see Mendez?"

"No seeum—*smellum!*" She wrinkled her freckled nose.

"Can you, uh, smell Marian?"

"Marian aw ri'. Cry now. Feel like big foo'."

"Could you get a message to Marian?"

"Try," she shrugged. "Like try tickle stone wit' feather."

"Do your best to reach her. Warn her about Mendez."

Standing with feet widespread Iskra gripped the platinum rail with both hands until her knuckles shone white. Sweat formed on her forehead, trickled down her cheeks and dripped off her outthrust chin.

"Mebbe so," she said at last as she relaxed with a sigh.

"Pancrief!" Merek called into his wrist communicator.

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"Standing by, sir."

"Big job for you. Land on the reservation. Convince the refugees—some of them anyway—that Earth's destruction was caused, not by the misuse of machines but by Siriun sabotage. We have evidence here which indicates they feared our race after it developed atomic power and space travel—wanted to stop our expansion."

"Ye-es sir. It may be difficult under the circumstances. Captain McCarthy died last night—in his sleep."

"Oh! Well, you'll have to try anyway. We're beginning to crack this nightmare but I have a hunch we won't get far unless the refugees help us."

"I'll do my best. Maybe Sharon will back me up." Pancrief cut off.

"Now," said Merek to Iskra, "tune in Mendez or whatever you do." To the tech he added, "Start Franklin's weapon and tune it slowly along whatever waveband it uses. If it's directional aim it at the fleet overhead."

Switches flipped. Tubes glowed. A low humming filled Merek's ears as though a swarm of bees had entered the room. He shook his head, covered his ears. The humming originated inside his skull.

"Turn off," Iskra wailed, her face white. "Sound like w'en Dark start come. No can smell Mendez."

"Then we're stymied again." Merek sat wearily on the nearest chair.

"Here's a suggestion," said Franklin. "Try using the weapon in bursts. Let Iskra check Mendez's reactions between those bursts."

Hours passed as they tinkered. Many of the stampeded councillors returned shamefacedly to report that the city's hysteria was dying down for lack of new material on which to feed. Someone brought sandwiches and black coffee. Alpha sank below the western horizon and Beta's warm rays began slanting through the chamber's eastern windows. Still Iskra merely shrugged her lovely shoulders after each burst of the Franklin gun.

They worked across the entire spectrum of radiation. At one point Iskra collapsed when they struck the band on which her extrasensory perception functioned. At another all Centaurans in the room became violently ill. But it was not until the vibrations were almost as short as those of light that the girl reported anything extraordinary taking place aboard the flagship.

"Mendez nervous," she whispered after one such blast. "Breath come quick. Stop talk to Rolphson on tight beam. Lick lips. Start cigarette. Throw 'way."

THEY tinkered some more.

"Mendez sweat," said Iskra. "Walk floor. Twist hand. Swear. Send Marian to cabin. Lock in."

The tech whistled through his buck teeth and moved the selector a hair.

"Mendez gone!" cried the girl.

"What do you mean, *gone?*" they yelled at her.

"Somethin' else on bridge," she reiterated. "Smell like Mendez. Think like—Siriun!"

"What is it doing?" Poynetz begged.

"Give order. Fleet reform. Head fo' Sirius."

"We're nudging the infra-red," said the tech as he twiddled the vernier ever so slightly. "Can't go much higher." He turned on the power, held it, cut it.

"Siriun lie across desk," Iskra reported. "Twitch! Officer run. Get doctor."

"What is Marian doing?"

"'Ammer on door. Scream. Try get out. Nobody 'ear. Ship go fas' now," she added wearily. "Eight G. Marian flat on floor. On bridge Siriun in Mendez body wiggle li'l bit. Open eye. Sit up."

"That *does* it!" Merek beat his forehead with a clenched fist. "The fleet is drawing out of range. When it gets to Sirius we're really done for."

A bell tone from his communicator interrupted. "Made it, sir," came Pancrief's voice. "I put it to them straight

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and Sharon backed me to the hilt. I think they had an inkling of the real truth before. Anyway, when Sharon told 'em that if the Siriuns planned to enslave humanity it was better for the refugees to die on their feet than live on their knees you should have heard 'em cheer. She tore passive resistance to shreds and threw it away. Then she ran up the old United Nations banner on the wreck and asked for volunteers. Practically everyone young enough to walk joined up. What next?"

"Get refugee 'board ship quick," cried Iskra, who had been eavesdropping. "Pan bring ship 'ere. Pick up Iskra, Merek, Franklin, new gun. Go Beacon."

"Are you crazy? Rolphson will crucify us."

"Mus' take chance." She danced up and down like a little girl. "Please, brudder."

"If we could get Rolphson to help and the refugees could handle the controls we still might use the barb drive to beat Mendez to the Dark Planet," Merek mused. "Okay, Pancrief. Take the Terra up fast and bring her here. Hover over the Capitol out of reach of the mob. Drop ladders and a baggage sling. Bring all volunteers along, of course."

"Roger," chortled Pancrief.

Briefly the admiral outlined Iskra's wild plan to Franklin, Poynetz and three or four other Councillors. "It's our last chance," he concluded.

"At least it may give us a breathing spell," said Franklin. "Poynetz, you will take over here while I'm gone. First thing you have to do is to order all older Centaurans to go to the Bank and have their confounded memory clocks turned back. Give them their youth again. Make men and women of them again instead of death-fearing immortals. Then, in case we fail out there, start building defenses for a last ditch fight here."

"People will be completely lost and helpless without their most recent memories." Poynetz was back in form. "How will they know how to run modern machines and things?"

"They're lost and helpless now." Franklin led the Pizarian to a window and pointed to the milling terrified throngs which surrounded the chamber, waiting for the Council to perform some miracle. "Turn them back, starting with yourself. You had a lot more backbone when I knew you—and were a pretty good soldier as well as a bum philosopher. They'll learn the new techniques quickly if they have to."

"Poynetz goo' man," said Iskra cheerfully as she and Franklin helped the wistful tech carry his jerry-built transmitter to the Capitol's flat roof. "Put backbone in Council, Centauran. Make-um fight." She hitched up her kilt as though getting ready for battle, then grimaced as she was reminded of her bad arm.

The Terra drifted across the screaming city half an hour later to drop a boarding ladder and freight net on the roof. They sent the precious gun up first.

"You'd better go with us," said Merek as the tech turned reluctantly away. "You know how to tune the thing. What is *your* name, by the way?"

"Paulson, sir." The little fellow's face shone. "Ex-Navy C.O. too. I'm absolutely non-telepathic, sir. Thank you sir." He went up the ladder like a monkey.

"Your turn next." Merek turned to Iskra to find tears of vexation in her eyes.

"No can climb," she raged. "Iskra no goo' wit' one arm. Leave behind be mudder."

"Ahoy, Terra," he called. "Drop that net again."

Down it came. Giggling, Iskra curled up in it like a kitten.

Inside the ship they were surrounded by cheering crew members and young refugees of both sexes.

"Friends," said Merek when he had caught his breath from the climb up the ladder, "we're heading toward Beacon to try to make an alliance with the barbs

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against the Siriuns. Emperor Rolphson may feed us to the fees. The Siriuns have the Centauran fleet. Frankly we haven't one chance in a thousand for survival. I think that one chance depends on the help you veterans and you refugees give us. But don't let that sway you. If anyone wants to be landed let him speak."

No one spoke. Instead, another cheer went up as Merek led the way to the bridge. "Take over, Iskra," he said when they got there. "I don't want to try maneuvering this ship with the barb driver at such close quarters."

SHE WAITED until the anti-gravs had pushed them to a safe distance above the disturbed ant hill which was Mercon City. She squinted, beat time with her foot, studied the starry heavens, pushed the makeshift lever a notch, jerked it back as the ship threatened to turn inside out.

Gasping from the wicked agony the others looked through the view port. Parched Beacon lay under them like a skull. All about floated the barb globes.

"Time Iskra come 'ome," a sardonic voice boomed through the communicator. "Bring Merek, udders 'board flagship. 'Ave talk. Rolphson speak."

A gig was waiting when Merek, Iskra, Pancrief Franklin and Sharon reached the pressure hatch. A little later they were being marched through the draughty corridors of the emperor's ship to the savage skirling of bagpipes. This time the warriors who formed their escort did not jeer.

Rolphson received them in the same silk-draped fur-piled room where Merek had renewed acquaintance with his father. The youth had grown to virile manhood in the months which had intervened. He was wide of shoulder and firm of jaw. He winked at them gravely and studied Iskra until Merek felt a pang of jealousy. Then the ruler noted her stiff arm and shrugged as though writing her off.

After introducing the group of chiefs and chieftainesses who attended him, Rolphson clapped his hands. The inevitable horns of mead and platters of stew were brought in.

"Iskra jus' tell Rolphson 'about new weapon," the emperor said as the feast got under way. "Centauran want make alliance. Use gun on Siriun?"

The admiral nodded.

"Barb no need Centauran. Take weapon. Use."

"I think not," Merek answered between bites. "Your people fear The Dark. Our gun has only a short range. Barbarians would never be able to get near enough to Sirius to use it. Your pilots would go mad—get lost in the Coal Sack."

The emperor wiped gravy out of his budding moustache and looked long and hard at Sharon while Pancrief ground his teeth.

"Rolphson pay refugee much gold to join barb. Guide ship. Aim Franklin gun."

Sharon covered a yawn.

"Give refugee whole planet for 'ome." He drank in her petite auburn beauty, something new in his experience. "Rolphson make Sharon Firs' Mudder."

Sharon laughed.

"Torture?" he suggested.

"Rolphson no talk like Rolph son." Iskra held out her horn for a refill.

"W'at Centauran want?" The emperor flushed and stopped his ragging.

"Simply that your people go back to Omega and leave us in peace if we defeat the Siriuns."

"W'en we start?" Rolphson knew when he was licked.

"At once," Franklin spoke up. "We must beat Mendez to the Dark Planet."

"Refugee no know 'ow run ship," one of the barb chieftains objected.

"*I* know how," said Sharon proudly. "Many of us understand a bit about space travel. We always feared we might be driven from Mercon as you barbarians were. Our ship is battered but not quite the wreck we led the Centaurans to believe. My—my father took

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a lot of us kids on short flights at night and taught us the rudiments of astrogation."

Merek whistled. And he had thought the refugees were children.

"We thought if we refused to use machines and claimed to be non-resistors we might be left in peace," the girl went on. "But not by the Siriuns! None of us are safe in the same universe with them. That's why we consented to help you."

"Sharon think 'round corner like barb." Rolphson patted her shoulder. "Make goo' warrior." To Merek and Franklin he added, "Alliance aw ri'. Wanna sign treaty wit' blood?"

"Let's drink to victory instead," answered the admiral, who knew the barbs took a dim view of written documents.

Once more the horns were emptied while the fur-kilted Clansmen whooped.

"Start now, reach Dark Planet week 'fore Mendez," said Rolphson.

"No goo'," Iskra grunted as she massaged her sword arm. "Siriun send Dark. Centauran no think ri'. Barb go crazy. Run berserk. Kill one 'nudder."

"If there's danger of a mental crack-up," said Sharon, "all small arms must be locked up. Then it will take at least a day or two for us refugees to familiarize ourselves with the controls of your ships. Finally, all of you barbs must consent to be confined to quarters until we get within Franklin-gun range of the Dark Planet."

Rolphson looked bleak. The chiefs, who always slept with weapons under their hard pillows, cried out in protest. But they remembered all too vividly the chaos which resulted when the Dark invaded their brains. After a stormy argument, during which they almost came to blows, they sullenly agreed to Sharon's ultimatum.

"Also," said Franklin, "we can't start until each ship is equipped with one of my weapons. "If that is done we may be able to deploy our forces on landing and attack several—uh—cities simultaneously."

"*Cities*!" jeered Pancrief, who had kept glumly silent all through the conference. "How do we know the Siriuns live in cities? How do we know they live at all in the accepted sense? Maybe they're just ghosts pawing at our minds."

"Why Pan!" Sharon's eyes widened. "You're not suggesting we don't attack?"

"Oh, I'm for an attack all right," he grumbled, "but I do like to see what I'm attacking. Searchlights won't be any good beyond a few yards in that muck . . . Say, Merek!" He chewed a bony knuckle. "How about a bunch of direct-view sniperscopes? The Siriuns couldn't fog them. Nuh-huh—the barbs could never make enough of them in such a short time, especially if they have to turn out Franklin-guns too."

"Pancrief show how. Barb do!" Rolphson bristled.

"Okay," Pan dropped an eyelid at Merek. "Take me to your lab, if you have one, and we'll get busy."

XVII

ROLPHSON made good his boast, his artificers sweating over their hand forges like demons for 48 straight hours to do the job. When his fleet lifted from sun-scorched Beacon three days after that first conference, each ship was equipped with unbeautiful but workable and portable radiators while a goodly supply of 'scopes was stored, along with racked swords and hand weapons, in locked and refugee-guarded armories.

With refugees at their helms the battlewagons smashed their way through the continuum along an impossible trajectory plotted by barbarian astrogators. Before their crews had time to draw three choking breaths they had hurdled the light years and materialized in normal space, 500 miles or less from the Dark Planet.

The Centaurans were standing with Iskra on the Terra's bridge when Sharon jerked them out of hyper-space like

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a veteran. As they fought the nausea resulting from that fantastic hop they stared at their target. It shone like a great pearl in the crude light of mammoth Sirius and its white-dwarf twin.

"What fools we are," said Merek bitterly. "Sirius has been the evil genius of the human race for countless millenia. Now here we are, at our rope's end, attacking it with a—a fly swatter!"

"Isn't it about time?" Sharon asked matter-of-factly as she watched other barb ships popping into view like balls in some sleight-of-hand trick. As a tribute to her father she was wearing his threadbare old United Nations uniform today. With her red hair and freckled eager face she looked cute enough to frame.

"The Sumerians feared the Dog Star as a bringer of storms, heat and swarms of locusts," Franklin recalled to hide the depression which was clamping down on him. "The Greeks said Sirius was the vicious dog of that hunter of the skies, Orion."

"Father always said Orion was the only Irishman in the heavens," Sharon quipped.

"Rome called Sirius the Evil Star." This from Merek as he leaned dispiritedly against the thick plexiglass of the blister. "The Romans sacrificed red dogs to avert pestilence during the Dies Caniculares or Dog Days."

"Wish we had a few red dogs to sacrifice right now," muttered Pancrief. "I have a hunch we'll have our ears beaten off when we go downstairs."

"*Pan!*" Sharon's voice was sharp. "What's got into you?"

"Nothing," he frowned. Then his own voice sharpened. "Watch out, Sharon! You'll collide with that ship to our left!"

"What ship?"

"That one right there!" Pancrief lunged toward the controls.

"Stay away!" Sharon snatched an automatic from the control desk and pointed it unwaveringly. "That ship is at least ten miles distant."

Pancrief's adam's apple bobbed. "Guess you're right," he mumbled. "I thought—my head . . ."

"Get off the bridge, both of you," Merek yelled in unreasoning anger. "Who's in command here, anyway? I'll take over now, Sharon. It's going to be ticklish getting through those clouds."

"Sorry." Sharon's voice was tight as her grip on the gun. "Stay where you are!"

A spitting ball of insensate fury launched itself across the room. It was Iskra gone berserk—driven by screaming blood lust toward the first object in her path.

Caught off-balance by the unprovoked attack Sharon fired wildly, then went down under the barbarian's rush, fighting to protect her eyes from wildly jabbing fingers. Jerked out of their funk by the hellish scene the others sprang to her rescue.

Although she had only one good arm, the thing that had been Iskra fought like a demon, biting, punching, digging at exposed nerve endings with fingertips of steel. Almost she succeded in crippling all of them.

Hating himself for what he had to do, Merek managed to catch the berserker's stiff arm and twist it with all his might. Something gave. Iskra collapsed with a wild scream.

Working like men in a bad dream while battered little Sharon dragged herself back to the controls the others bound Iskra, then set about reviving her.

"Dark," she moaned like a child as consciousness returned. "Dark say . . . 'OOOoooh! . . . Kill Sharon. Bring ship down. Surrender. OOOoooh!"

She struggled to a sitting position and opened eyes into which the light of sanity was slowly returning. "Iskra 'urt bad," she whimpered and buried her bruised dirt-streaked face in her hands.

"Iskra—Iskra, honey," Merek pleaded as he knelt beside her. "Forgive me." Then, as he realized what had happened, he whooped, "Iskra! *Look*! You're us-

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ing your right arm! The lesions were broken loose in that fight!"

SHE raised her head, stared at her fingers, flexed them experimentally. A great joy was born on her face. "Use both arm," she husked. "Iskra goo' 'nuff for Merek 'gain!" To prove it, she threw both arms around her blood brudder and kissed him until his lips ached.

"Look outside!" Pancrief's cry broke the idyll. "Something awful's happening."

Merek lifted Iskra to the blister just in time to see the nearest ship explode in a flash of atomic fire. Farther away a second vessel was falling apart like a badly-constructed tinker-toy. As they stared two others winked back into hyper.

"Barb go crazy." Iskra had that faraway look in her eyes. "Kill refugee wit' bare 'ands on four ship. Seize bridge."

"What about Rolphson's flagship?" came Sharon's frantic cry. In her excitement she had jammed the communicator switches and was getting nothing but a roar of static. "Merek, call Paulson and get him to start the radio working."

"Flagship aw ri'," Iskra reported. "Refugee 'old bridge. Same on udder ship."

Paulson scurried in, tinkered and shook his mousey head. "Whatever the Siriuns are sending up has jinxed the radio, sir."

"Use the blinker then," Merek ordered. "Tell all the ships to turn on their Franklin-guns and get down within range quick!"

"I've been thinking," Franklin said to nobody in particular as he ran nervous fingers through his white hair. "Merek said once that when the Dark came to Omega it short-circuited many types of radiation. Lights dimmed. Heating units cooled. Well, since my radiator is powered by electricity . . ."

"No think! No think!" Iskra shrieked. "Siriun 'ear."

By reflex action Sharon slammed home the switch of the Tera's Franklin-gun. Even as she did so the gibbering Dark hit them with vastly augmented force.

"Done for this time—and all my fault," sobbed Franklin as the ship's lights dimmed and the gun panel ammeter, which had started to climb, sagged back. Merek and Pancrief were weeping like school boys. Iskra was frothing at the mouth and tearing at her bonds. Only Sharon and the non-telepathic Paulson remained calm as they nursed the staggering ship.

Gradually the lights brightened, the ammeter needle snapped back across its dial and the buzzing whine of the Franklin-gun steadied.

"Thank God we made it before the Siriuns caught on," whispered Sharon. The others bowed their heads.

"Two more ships going down out of control," Paulson reported. "The others got guns going in time to save themselves. We're not licked yet."

"They'll pay for this," Pancrief raged as he dried his tears. "No slimy Siriun is going to get away with making me blubber."

"How do you feel now, Iskra?" Merek inquired as he mopped his own streaming face.

"Fine!" She took a long shuddering breath. "Gun push Dark back. Dark go 'ere—go dere. Like scare'." She yawned prodigiously. "Iskra sleep now. Tire'." Her eyelids fluttered shut. She was asleep before he finished untying her.

XVIII

AS his mind cleared Merek felt a new spirit of exhiliration surge through him. The prospect of battle warmed his blood. His mind dismissed the hazards, the unknowables that lay ahead.

"How many ships still with us?" he asked Paulson.

"Eighteen, sir, including this one." The C.O. looked up briefly from the now

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perfectly-operating radio. "All of them in fighting shape except the Montrak. Her refugee pilot—Fortune's his name, sir—says the Montrak's Franklin-gun is partially jammed. Her barbs are still in a bad way."

"Tell Fortune to drop back out of range. Tell him to cover our rear and try to warn us in case Mendez and his fleet arrive before we have finished downstairs. All others follow the Terra to rendezvous at one thousand five hundred."

He looked at Iskra. The thought of his incubus-ridden enemy spoiled some of his new confidence. Perhaps she could make contact. He shook his head as he studied her wan sleeping face. He couldn't disturb her yet. She might be able to help more later on if she had a chance to rest now. Maybe, he ventured to hope, Mendez had got himself lost in hyper-space.

"You had better take the controls now," said Sharon. "I'm afraid I'm not up to making a landing. Meantime I have a request to make."

"You name it," he said absent-mindedly as he stepped to the board, his mind busy with calculations of firepower, moves that might be anticipated from the Siriuns, principles of tactics and strategy remembered from his reading about old battles and his own experience.

"Food," Sharon replied. "We refugees cling to that old-fashioned habit of eating three times a day. And the McCarthys are among the best clingers in the clan. After what the barbs have been through I suspect they're hungry too."

Merek had a flash of resentment. Food indeed! Why couldn't the refugees employ the C.S.N. technique of swallowing delayed-action concentrates before going into battle—the technique which made it unnecessary to carry bulky food and cooking equipment on short campaigns and freed all hands for uninterrupted action. Instead he was stuck with hundreds of refugees and thousands of barbs who wouldn't be worth much as fighters until they had square meals under their belts. Oh well, this was far from being one of the galaxy's ten best-organized expeditions.

"Go ahead." He grinned belatedly at Sharon. "It will take us at least three hours to surface. I'll pass the word along to the fleet. The rest of you go along to the mess hall. I can handle things here for a while. Eat hearty." He clamped his teeth on an impulse to add that it might be the last meal for all of them.

Alone with the heavily-sleeping Iskra Merek swallowed three D.A.C. capsules, paced the bridge and tried to think. A sense of the foolhardiness of the venture reassailed him. There were sketchy reports in War College archives about Siriun conquest of several neighboring solar systems but none defined their weapons or strategies. It was even rumored they never employed fighting ships.

"Never employed fighting ships!" The phrase lingered in his mind, inviting analysis as he plotted a new orbit for the Terra, swung her into it with a short burst of rudder tubes and called the coordinates to the rest of the fleet. Did the Siriuns depend mainly on engendering fear and blind terror by their telepathic broadcasting? And what conceivable means could they use to broadcast thoughts? "I've got to think this thing through," he muttered. "Got to!"

He was still pacing when the others returned. There was no need for orders. Sharon took her place beside the controls. Pancrief methodically checked the infra-red gun pointers. Paulson called one after the other of the commanding barb officers and their refugee pilots and logged their reports. Franklin stood at the blister, watching the featureless planet come to meet them.

The admiral paused long enough to switch on the battle perception recorder that would give them—if they ever got back—a detailed summary of action during the forthcoming battle. What

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kind of battle and what form of action, he wondered. Action without Siriun fighting ships? Was that haunting phrase a clue to understanding of conditions he would have to face within the next—he glanced at the chronometer—the next 59 minutes.

The Siriuns had vast powers, he thought, still trying to pin down that elusive concept. They could engender fear—fear which could kill barbarians or drive them mad, fear strong enough to cause radio static or short-circuit an electric light, fear which could bring proud Centaurans crawling to the Dark Planet as envoys of appeasement.

BUT how did they generate that power? How did they engender that fear without fighting ships? By projecting their thoughts? Yes—but a thought is a feeble thing, much like a radio wave. You could build a receiver with a relay which would put out a light if actuated by a feeble radio wave. But here was a thought transmitter that actuated not only a receiver—the brain—but acted directly on insensate matter!

No, he corrected himself, not matter—just other types of radiation such as light or electricity. Then you had to have a powerful, an ultra-powerful transmitter that would warp not only thought but the whole field of radiation across thousands of miles of empty space. And such a transmitter . . .

"Fifty-three minutes before we level at ten miles," Sharon called. Her voice seemed calm but Merek sensed undertones of panic.

"Fifty-three. . . fifty-two . . . fifty-one . . . fifty." The unspoken words ticked louder and louder in his brain. "I need more time than that," he cried inwardly. "I *must* have more time! I can't think this thing through in forty-nine minutes. I can't. But I don't dare give the Siriuns time to think either."

"What's our plan of attack, sir?" This time it was Pancrief who spoke. "The other ships are asking for instructions. I've told them you're waiting till the last possible minute but they're getting uneasy." The Pizarian hesitated. Then came the words Merek dreaded, yet knew would come—the words no officer but Pancrief would have dared utter—"You have a plan, don't you, sir?"

Merek felt the perspiration break out on his forehead, his neck, the backs of his hands. He was the leader of this tattered charge against the enemies of civilization. The peoples of Centaurus and Omega had put their last trust and hope in him. So had Iskra, Sharon, Franklin, Pancrief and his handful of veterans and refugee volunteers.

And he had no plan!

He fought back the impulse to tell Pancrief the truth—that he was lost in a labyrinth of thought leading nowhere—that they were all lost with him in the cruel seductive fog that already was beginning to brush its wet fingers along the Terra's ports.

"We shall rendezvous according to normal operational practice in forty-eight minutes," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Tell the other ships that. We shall follow a very simple plan which they can all understand as soon as the Terra initiates it. For purposes of deception, that is all that can be said about our attack plan now."

"My great twinkling stars!" he said to himself as Pancrief began relaying the message. "I sounded as bombastic as old Mendez himself."

To warriors like himself, speculated the cornered admiral as he resumed his pacing, armies and navies were the only sources of military power. In the last analysis, armed might was employed to inspire fear in their enemies—fear that would make them quit fighting and surrender. But, so far as could be proven, the Siriuns did not have armies and navies. Yet they inspired fear. How? By means of thought power multiplied almost to infinity by some sort of telepathic transmitter. Destroy that transmitter . . . *BUT FIRST, FIND THAT TRANSMITTER.*

How could such a thing be located on

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a planet containing space knew how many milion square miles of surface and wrapped in a twenty-mile-thick cloud blanket? If there were such a thing as telepathic radar—or was there such a thing? Maybe so. Mebbe so, as Iskra would say—*Iskra*!

"Thirty-seven minutes!" Sharon's panic was no longer hidden.

"Iskra, honey!" He kneeled beside the sleeping girl and shook her gently.

"Iskra tire'," she murmured, stirring fretfully. "Go 'way."

"Iskra! I need your help again." There was no response.

"Thirty-six minutes!"

"Iskra 'fraid," he jabbed at her in the patois, striving to reach her subconscious mind. "Merek say rabbit no fight. Subchief Rabbit Clan 'fraid to fight too!"

She awoke, fighting mad, just as he had hoped.

"Listen, honey." He caught her fist as she swung it at his head. "Remember I told the Council there was one chance in a thousand that we could slow up the Siriuns? Now I think there's a chance in a hundred that we can stop them for good. That's worth a fight, isn't it?"

"Yah!" Her anger evaporated.

"You may get hurt again. You may be killed."

"Dat aw ri'. W'at Brudder Merek want Iskra do?"

MEREK motioned to Pancrief to join them, then continued. "I'm going to gamble everything on one big guess. I'm guessing that somewhere on the Dark Planet is a super-transmitter, a tremendously powerful mechanical device that can magnify and send out telepathic waves on a tight beam.

"So we've got to locate that transmitter and move in fast," Merek continued, one eye on the clock. "Iskra is the only one who can do it for us, at least on this ship. And I don't want to toss any guesses at Rolphson just yet. Or," he added thoughtfully, "to Siriun eavesdroppers, if I can help it."

"How do you know there's only one transmitter?" asked the practical Pizarian.

"I don't. But in view of its long range I'm betting the equipment required is so tremendous that there won't be more than two of them at the most. Since the possible second one would broadcast in the opposite direction from its twin it must be on the other side of the planet where it can't harm us. We can attend to it later."

"And you think Iskra can get you a fix on the thing?"

"Iskra get fix," the girl said confidently. "Fix Siriun too!"

"It won't be nice." Merek knew she understood what he had in mind.

"Dat aw ri'. On Omega rabbit chase fox." She was impish and gay. Lying with long straight legs together and hands held rigidly at her sides she added, "Tie Iskra now. Might make mistake w'en Dark come. Chase Merek!"

"We'll hold the other ships back slightly," Merek explained as he and Pancrief did her bidding. "Then we'll warp the Terra into a series of what used to be called 'lazy eights'. We'll move back and forth, descending slowly, over the part of the planet facing us. Iskra will give us a series of directional readings on the waves as she picks them up."

"But Iskra can only hear the Siriuns if we turn off the Franklin-gun."

"So we'll turn it off for short periods, like when we were putting the bee on Mendez's incubus."

"No," said Franklin, who could not fail to hear the conversation, "it won't work. If you shut off the gun even for a second that transmitter down below is so close to us by now that it will short-circuit every piece of apparatus on board. You won't be able to get the gun started again and the Terra will crash. Why—why . . ."—he pressed his hand to the old wound on his scalp—"I remember now. That's why the lifeboat hit that mine. We were drifting—out of

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control. I heard Hank shouting—"

"Thirty-three minutes," Sharon exclaimed. "We've got to do something right now. Would this do—cut down the power on the gun but don't stop it? Iskra should be able to—"

"That's it. That's *it!*" Merek leaped to the mike and issued the "hold back" order to the other ships. Paulson knelt beside Iskra, electronic computer at his elbow. Pancrief gripped the power knob of the Franklin-gun and started turning it counter-clockwise.

"Hear anything, Iskra?" he asked. When she shook her head he reduced the wattage still more. The buzzing of the gun dwindled. The bridge lights dimmed slightly. The ship staggered as one of its drive tubes sputtered, went into a shallow dive.

"'Ear now." Iskra bit her lips. "Not strong. Say, 'Ooooh. Aw Centauran stupid. Be trap down below. Made think like Siriun.' Say 'OOOooooh. Barb make goo' fee food.' Say . . ." She writhed in her cocoon of plastic cord.

"What's our speed, Sharon?" snapped Merek, steadying himself by gripping a handhold as the ship lurched.

"Thousand mph. Altitude twenty-one miles," she sang out calmly. "Losing both altitude and speed fast."

"Thought get stronger." Iskra cried in a voice which made the little group shiver. "Stronger . . . darker . . . . stronger!" She began to babble a series of revolting insane Siriun threats in a wild effusion of anguish. Veins stood out on her forehead. The cords of her neck flexed and glistened with sweat. She fought her bonds like a madwoman, ground her teeth until a red trickle ran from her mouth.

Transfixed by the sight of the torture he had ordered, Merek waited helplessly for the peak of it to pass. He had witnessed the agonies of death on battlefields of four planets but never had he seen or himself endured a thing like this. Every moment he expected the girl to break—to burn herself out like a faulty tritium tube.

INSTEAD she clung to consciousness of a sort, vibrating with a spark that seemed to invite the full play of the mighty currents that wracked her. At last she partially relaxed and opened eyes which were still sane. She tried to speak but could only croak.

"Did you chart that?" Merek gritted at the tech.

"Yes sir." The little fellow was sniffling shamelessly. "But it will take at least three more runs to get a real fix."

"Speed six hundred thirty," sobbed Sharon. "Altitude ten miles and a bit."

"Full power on the gun, Pan," he ordered. "Bring her up to speed and altitude again, Sharon. We'll come in at right angles to our first run this time."

The Terra hit her stride again. Soon the fog, which had been pressing against the blister like a pall, dissipated as they climbed back into the harsh light of Sirius.

Twice more the Terra stumbled around its lazy eight above the plant. Twice more Iskra went bravely through that awful cycle.

"*Got* it, sir!" Paulson whimpered at last as the calculator whirred and chattered its answer to their riddle. "There seem to be three beams, one aimed at Centaurus, one at Omega, the other at the fleet. They all come from a spot that can't be more than two miles square. Here are the coordinates." He scribbled on a sheet of plascript and handed it to Merek. "Wait—I'll put the time on that."

"Great Galaxy!" his commander gasped. "Twelve minutes left. Pancrief! Tell the others we level off and rendezvous at this spot. Altitude ten miles. Attack formation."

"Do we surround the transmitting area and work toward the center?" The Pizarian already was at the mike.

"No. I'm afraid of what the Franklin-guns might do to our minds if any ship got caught in a crossfire. I'll take the Terra off toward the center. Have the others follow in single file. They

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know the order. There's bound to be some tremendous contraption down there which will show up in the sniper-scopes. We'll go into a tight circle. Fire at will in—ten minutes, thirty seconds. Don't ask for acknowledgments. We haven't time."

"And if," said Pancrief when he had broadcast the message, "the infra-red cannon don't do the job, what then?"

"We'll crashland and go after them with hand weapons."

"Dat goo'," sighed Iskra weakly. "Iskra wanna use sword arm 'gain."

She sat up groggily as Merek untied her and began chafing her swollen wrists and ankles.

"No," he said. "You've done far more than your share. You'll stay right here and rest this time, my lady."

"Dat w'at Merek think?" she answered cheerfully.

"What kind of a crazy war is this?" groaned Pancrief. Nevertheless he was grinning broadly as he and Paulson continued to flash coded instructions which got the other ships lined up behind the Terra, their crews lashed down in shock harness for the possible crash-landings.

In the few minutes remaining Merek checked with his own deck officers—forgotten men in this type of pushbutton warfare—and found time to promise all on board that they would get their whack at the hated Siriuns soon. Then he took over the controls from Sharon and, eyes glued to the sniperscope, sent the Terra screaming down through the thickening fog toward her unseen target.

"This is it, rabbit." He smiled tightly at Iskra, as a faint *beep* and a twinkle of purple light on the indicator panel showed that the assembled fleet was following him down.

XIX

TROUBLE!" said Pancrief at the communicator as he clapped both hands over his earphones to hear better. "Double trouble!"

"What?" Merek did not dare take his eyes from the illuminated chart on which the Terra was a white dot racing toward a rendezvous with a spot marked X.

"Franklin's damned guns are heterdyning in this tight formation—cancelling each other out. At least that's the way it sounds."

"Well?"

"Pilot Horton—he's on the ship right behind us—says his barbs have cut loose again. They're battering down the diaphragm to the bridge. Crazy as loons. Oh, oh! Ship Number Three is out of formation. Ships Seven and Eight have collided! Lord, what a mess!" He snatched off the phones as though they were burning him and hurled them across the cabin. "What a foul misbegotten mess, just when we had 'em in our pocket."

Merek risked a glance at Iskra, expecting her to be creeping toward him like a tigress. Instead she was standing wide eyed with horror at this unexpected development.

"Why aren't we getting the effect?" he yelled at Franklin.

"I—I can't imagine," the President quavered.

"I think it's because we're in the lead," cried Paulson. "The others are in that crossfire you were worried about."

"Then it's up to us," said Merek. "We'll lead from weakness instead of from strength. Get our infra-reds warmed up. We're going in. Tell the others to follow us if they can. If they can't they should break formation and get out of range."

"On target in ten seconds," warned Sharon, who had not lifted her eyes from the chart.

"Hold on, everybody," said Pancrief, shifting quickly to the gun pointer. "Something's showing on the 'scope. But what it is the devil himself couldn't guess. Damn this rarefied pitch outside."

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Five seconds . . . four seconds—even though their Franklin gun still functioned properly, the Siriun broadcast was getting through at this short range. The ship's lights turned blood red and her controls were erratic. Iskra was screaming thinly. Even Merek's brain was whirling so that he could barely see the chart. He turned away from it in synthetic despair and did not even notice that Sharon had leaped to take his place.

Three seconds . . . two seconds—Pancrief collapsed at the gun pointer and sprawled across Franklin's senseless body. Paulson snatched the triggers and held them steady as rocks.

One second!

The Terra bucked like a fee as her three old infra-reds let loose. Sucking power like sponges from the ship's generators and packs they sprayed toward the invisible target a roaring boiling shortrange burst of radiation beside which the fires of hell paled to moonbeams. Against the tremendous armament of the Centauran flagship the Terra would have been able to last for seconds only. Now her guns belched on and on. And, Merek saw as he leaned his throbbing head against the blister, eight of the remaining barbarian ships followed suit.

In the center of this maelstrom a giant's finger pointed accusingly at the attackers—a finger of steel which, as the endless moments passed, turned cherry red, then white, then burst into a flame that outshone that of the guns above as the giant slowly folded his finger back against his palm. And then . . .

S-i-l-e-n-c-e!

Cool beautiful crystal clear silence—silence so vibrant it could be heard—silence that took one's breath away. The lovely much-sought cone of silence that, since man first let radio waves guide him, had meant safety to generations of navigators and astrogators. It was even more than that. It was a peace beyond human understanding, at least since the Siriuns had started their hellish broadcasting across the galaxy.

"We'll go down to two hundred feet," said Merek, fighting to keep his voice even. "Paulson, criscross an area ten miles square just to be sure. Pancrief," he added as the shamefaced Pizarian staggered erect, "tell the ships that followed us in to land when we do and get ready for a sally. Try to get the remaining ships here too. Tell Fortune to keep a sharp lookout for Mendez. We're not out of the woods yet. And," he added as his friend started to open his mouth, "don't apologize for fainting. The Siriuns knocked me right out of the ring too."

They did not need the 'scope now to show them a job well done. Beneath them, glowing through the gloom, lay the metallic skeleton of what undoubtedly had been the tallest tower in the entire galaxy. More than a mile high, it must have been. Spotted irregularly near the fallen giant were other glowing objects—difficult to identify but resembling flattened globes and cylinders. Probably the sources of power for the obscene carrier wave which had been modulated by the even more fiendish thoughts of the Siriuns.

JUST two hours later they finished their second scorching of the area. Merek was about to give the landing order to the Terra and the sixteen barb ships that had finally assembled when the alarm on the radar clanged.

"Patrols!" cried Pancrief. "We caught them napping but I knew they'd finally catch up with us. Here we go again."

"A barrel of Scopio says they're not Siriun patrols," Merek frowned "Look at that screen!"

"It's the fleet," Pancrief whispered, licking his well-chewed lips. "Dozens of pips. Clap hands, here comes Mendez. And here goes what's left of us."

Catching a twinkle in Iskra's eye Merek played a hunch.

"Tune in the communicator," he ordered briskly, "and I'll invite Rear Ad-

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miral Mendez down for tea."

It was not Mendez but a greatly puzzled Marian whose face appeared on the screen. "Admiral Mendez had a nervous breakdown of some kind about two hours ago," she began without preamble. "He's conscious now but seems to have amnesia of some sort. He can't remember a thing that happened after he made that first treaty with Sirius."

"That's too bad. Can he explain why he brought the fleet here this time?"

"Hasn't the faintest idea. He even denies he locked me in my cabin. When he collapsed one of the officers let me out and of course I took over immediately."

"Of course." What on Mercon, thought Merek, had he ever seen in this dry-as-dust creature? But then, that had been before she went through the Memory Bank wringer she had devised in spite of Iskra's warning. Studying her wan unutterably-remote face Merek knew that he was looking not at a warm and troubled woman but at a human thinking machine.

"Come on down, Your Intelligence," he said gently. "We have just conquered the Dark Planet. I'll explain about Mendez and everything. The Montrak is near you. She will guide you to our landing place."

It was a happy but uneasy collection of humans and near-humans who set foot on the Siriun planet for the first time ten hours later. Scout ships had returned to the fleet in the meantime without finding the slightest sign of organized opposition or even of life on the entire fogbound sphere. Clocks said it was morning but there was only the faintest lightening of the mist blanket.

First came an armored halftrack bearing Marian and leaders of the joint expedition. Rolphson at first had insisted on riding a fee but the usually fearless insect had crouched trembling in its cage and refused to be enticed from it even by the smell of blood. Then, in order of precedence, came the refugees who alone had made success possible—the swaggering veteran crew of the Terra—the battered edgy barbarians and, in the rear, the popeyed landing crews carried by ships of the Centauran fleet.

Looking like monsters with the upper halves of their faces covered by protruding snoutlike sniperscopes, they left the well-guarded ships behind. Weapons in hand, they passed the still-smoking wreck of the telepathic projector and advanced warily toward what the scouts had described as a population center of some sort nearby.

First they crossed a marshy plain scattered with black boulders—at least they looked black through the 'scopes—and broken here and there by the eroded fangs of ancient hills. After slipping and sliding for half an hour in the sucking mud they entered the ruins of what must have been in some other age a magnificent city.

[*Turn page*]

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"Ruins!" puzzled Merek as he stopped the car and peered through the gloom. "Our infra-reds didn't touch this territory. Why ruins on what was, until yesterday, the richest and most powerful planet in the galaxy?"

"Looks like a civilization in the last stages of decay," whispered Franklin as though afraid the very fog could hear him. "These buildings must have crumbled ages and ages ago."

FIGHTING a desire to huddle together they drove on through the swirling mist. They must have gone a mile or more over the broken rust-rutted streets without finding a single sign of life or a building fit for habitation.

At last, however, one structure in some taste of repair loomed across their path like a squat toad. It was unutterably loathsome in its ugliness, yet it exuded a sort of forlorn grandeur. Somewhere far, far inside, a bell was tolling.

Something stirred in Merek's memory—a snatch of ancient terrestial poetry he had stumbled across in a dog-eared book. He murmured the lines.

'What in the midst lay but the Tower itself'?
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
In the whole world . . .

Franklin picked up the measure:

Not see? because of night perhaps?—Why, day
Came back again for that!
The hills, like giant at a hunting, lay—
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay—
Now stab and end the creature—to the heft!

He hesitated and Merek went on,

Not hear? when noise was everywhere? It tolled
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears,
Of all the lost adventurers my peers—
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
And such was fortunate, yet each of old
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

"How does it end?" Sharon begged as silence fell again, except for the endless tolling of the unseen bell. She was clinging to Pancrief's arm, in near-panic for the first time since she had joined them. Merek went on slowly:

'I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew, *"Childe Harolde to the Dark Tower came."*'

"Slug-horn," grunted Pancrief as he patted his sweatheart's hand. "Our infra-reds sure must have slugged them all right. Here we humans are, at the Dark Tower after countless millenia of struggle, agony and failure—and the Tower is dead."

"No," said Iskra. "Siriun not aw dead. Iskra 'ear voice far, far 'way, say, 'OOOooo!! Please no kill Siriun, human.' Say, 'OOOoooh! Long time 'go Dark Planet use up aw iron, coal, oil udder resource. Fear young strong race on rich planet. Fear death. 'Ave only mind. Wit' las' steel build telepath transmitter. Make big fear aw over galaxy. Divide an' rule. Make udder planet pay tribute, build ship, grow trade stuff fo' Siriun.'"

"That's enough," snarled Merek. "Tell them they can come in and surrender unconditionally or stay out there and starve."

Iskra resumed her singsong. "Say, 'OOOoooh! 'Uman goo' after aw. No kill Siriun. Now Siriun no 'fraid be goo' too.'"

Merek doubled up with bitter laughter—laughter that left him weak, shaken and a wiser man. "So throughout all the ages," he gasped at last, "the only thing either men or Siriuns have had to fear was fear itself."

"Mebbe so," answered Iskra wistfully, "but w'at Iskra do with goo' sword arm now?"

Ignoring the others in the halftrack, Merek showed her.

Next Issue: THIS WAY TO MARS, A Novelet by William Campbell Gault

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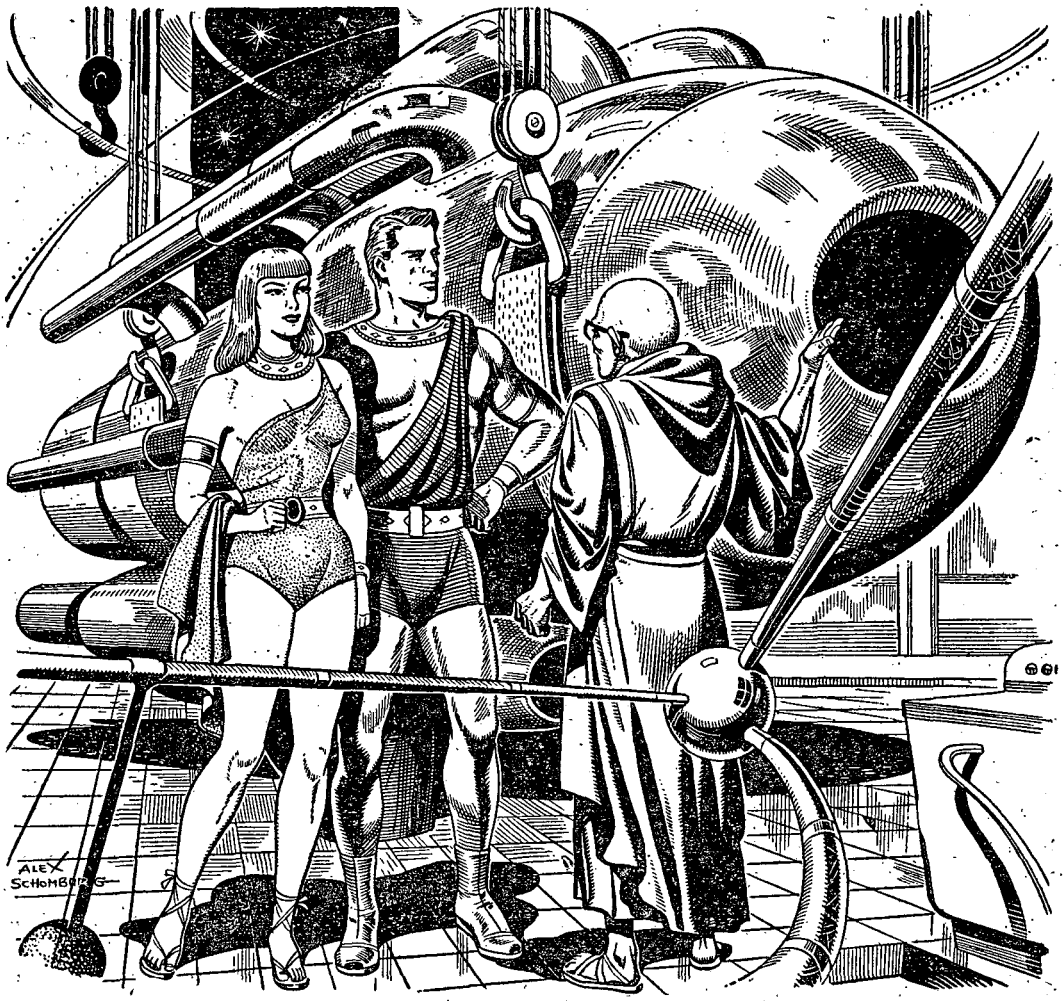

"Yes," said the scientist, "it came close to being the perfect machine"

The Ultimate Engine

By CARTER SPRAGUE

THEY stood, the three of them, in a bare white office in a building that was the last habitable place on Earth. Two of them, one man and the woman, were tall and lean and handsome and golden fair. Save for the difference of sex, which both wore with pride, they might almost have been interchangeable with their clothing.

The other man was swarthier, less handsome, not so tall. Beneath the brief white robe that was his only garment his body was stooped and thin. His features were not so well defined and his

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limbs protruded from the core of his trunk like knobby twigs.

Yet his brow was broad and high and lumped with thought. Beneath it his eyes were luminous with something deeper than thought—aglow with a luminosity which found no response in the cool assured serenity of the other two.

"We have come to you." It was the tall man who spoke first. His voice wore the timbre of assurance, the perfect diction not of intellectual awareness of language but of costly governesses and tutors. If there was the faintest trace of condescension as well, ingrained courtesy concealed it.

"Explanation will be easier here on the laboratory level," said the less-beautiful male. "Therefore I summoned you."

The woman spoke and her voice was liquid silver, low, exciting as a true aphrodisiac even in casual converse. "Then your people have found the Way?" she asked.

"We have found *a* way," said the older man, whose name was Zindorff. He was chief of science of the building, which was the city, which was the last habitable place on Earth.

"And you have not reported it sooner?" The man of beauty, whose name was Marcou, would have been expressing exasperation, even anger, had he been capable of displaying either.

"After so many centuries of failure," said Zindorff humbly, "we thought it wiser not to raise hope until success was assured."

"But this is splendid." The woman, whose name was Orella and who, with Marcou, was co-ruler of the last and finest remnant of the human species, lit up as women of an earlier Earth became luminescent when diamonds were laid in their laps.

"And none too soon," said Marcou the magnificent, acid still etched faintly upon the tip of his tongue. "As it is we shall have little enough time to prepare. The atmosphere-machines cannot last much longer."

ZINDORFF said drily, "I know. My colleagues and I have been perhaps more aware of the urgency than anyone else." The dryness with which he spoke canceled any hint of rebuke.

"I want to see the ship," said Orella with what might have been eagerness in a woman less perfectly poised. "How long will the journey take?"

"It varies with the capacity of the traveler," Zindorff told them quietly. "That is what I wish to explain to you. You see, there is no ship."

"No ship?" said Marcou, frowning. "But if we are to reach even the nearest Centaurean planets . . ." His voice faded to uncomprehending silence.

"No ship," the scientist affirmed. "It has been impossible to build a star-ship on Earth, the while maintaining the city even at minimum survival efficiency for more than two hundred years. Our planet simply lacks the resources. Not even to Mars or Venus—"

"Who wishes escape to a dead planet?" asked Orella. "On either we would lack even the few comforts we still have here."

"Yet you have found the Way?" Marcou inquired.

"We have found *a* way," Zindorff repeated.

"Then I would see your machines," said Marcou. He spoke almost gently but the command was there.

These humans, the few thousands that remained of what had, scant centuries before been billions, lived in a society rigidly anarchistic. As the planet, increasingly stripped of its resources by unthinking human wastefulness and greed, had been less and less able to support its population human aims and institutions had altered beyond previous belief.

There had been, of course, a period of appalling wars, of genocide, of further destruction that had finally alarmed that little core of men and women who had, directly or otherwise, been the actual rulers of Earth since prehistoric times. They had at last been

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forced to united action through fear of non-survival.

They had weighed the resources remaining on or in their dying planet, had created the city high in the Andes, with the icy waters of Lake Titicaca close to its base. They had carefully fostered sterility among the battered human masses, the while they selected carefully those admissable to their sheltered ranks.

They bred themselves as men had once bred cattle—ruler to ruler, artist to artist, athlete to athlete, engineer to engineer, scientist to scientist. And their aim had been escape to the stars or rather the planets of the stars. They were like a colony of mammal ants—each born to his function, each living for it.

They had built mighty ships, powered by the less stable elements, had sent them to Mars, to Mercury, even to the Asteroids and the Moons of Saturn and Jupiter. But thus far they had found no other home suitable for humanity even on such a reduced scale—and they had failed miserably to penetrate space beyond Uranus.

In recent years hope had waned, been forgotten. No longer had they the resources to send ships even as far as the Moon. For as their experience increased and their knowledge grew with it the planet around them continued to die.

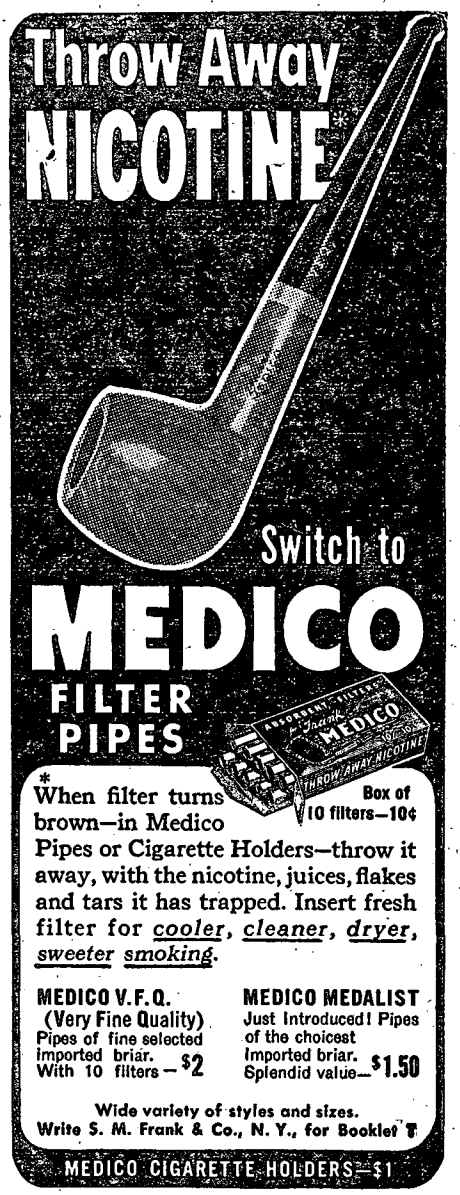
They had luxury beyond any known to Lucullus or Condé Nast—but they lived in a prison. They had art and verse and music and philosophy—but they were without dreams. They had a secure and perfectly adjusted society—but they had nowhere to take it. They had health and longevity beyond the belief of earlier scientists—but all they had to look forward to was death.

Until now—until now when, at Zindorff's summons, Marcou and Orella had come without hope to hear that at last the long-dying human dream lay within reach of fulfillment.

"I will show you what we have done," said the scientist, leading them toward an oval doorway of gleaming white metal. Here, on the laboratory level as elsewhere within its shelter dome, the city and all in it were designed for functional perfection.

"I only hope you will be able to understand," Zindorff added as he ushered the two aristocrats through ahead of him.

"We both won honors in general science," said Marcou, stooping a little so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that he would not crack his high rather narrow forehead on the seven-foot lintel. It was a little as if he were reminding a clever hunting dog that he too could find game.

IT WAS a long tour—lasting a solid forty minutes and covering a good two kilometers of halls and passageways. With their ingrained logic the scientists had built their engines in order, each representing a further step along the road to the stars.

"Here is an engine that might have taken us to Boötes—if we could have obtained sufficient tritium to power her," said Zindorff, pointing to a monstrous metal pile that seemed almost a solid chunk, without moving parts. Marcou mentioned this fact.

"Yes," said the scientist, nodding, "it came close to being the perfect engine or machine—which of course theoretically *must* be without moving parts. But it is useless."

"A pity," murmured Orella, stroking its metal side as if it were some sort of hairless pet. "It looks so powerful, so deadly."

"You mean dead, Orella," Marcou stated as they moved on.

There were others, some smaller, some larger still, each representative of a step in progress—yet paradoxically each a record of defeat as element after element failed them. Finally they emerged into a bare white room through an oval doorway.

"But—" Orella looked around her in bewilderment. "But this is your office—the room we started from."

"You are observant—and incidentally quite correct." A faint smile lifted the lined features of the scientist.

"If this is some sort of hoax—" began Marcou, reddening.

The scientist shook his head. "It is no hoax," he said. "I have not lied to you. We have found the answer. The Way—*a* way, rather—has been with us all the time."

He went to his desk, passed behind it, pressed a button. At once the lights dimmed around them. On the far wall a broad screen became luminous. The two aristocrats looked spellbound at the pictures it revealed, at the commentary Zindorff served as accompaniment.

They saw a strange pink sun, a strange incredibly young and fertile planet of thick blue-cast foliage and turf, of emerald waters, of amiable beasts and a pair of odd oval moons. They saw men and women living there, in a primitive but pleasant settlement—men and women some of whom they recognized.

"What does this mean?" Marcou asked sternly when the lights went on once more. "Are those vidarscenes real?"

"Perfectly—as real as you or I," replied Zindorff. "They were taken on the fourth planet of Alpha Centauri and brought back here."

"When do we go there?" Orella's voice betrayed both eagerness and anxiety. "It looks like heaven. All that space . . ."

"Whenever you are ready—and able," replied Zindorff. "That is what I hope to be able to explain. As you see some of our people have already made the trip."

Marcou took a threatening step toward Zindorff, who continued to regard him with a faint smile from behind the desk. "You actually mean that you traitorous scientists and your accomplices have deserted us. I thought it odd that the halls were empty on this level just now. I had meant to speak of it but . . ."

"Zindorff!" cried Orella and there were agony and terror in her voice now. "You haven't!"

"We intend to leave the path open for all who can follow," replied the scientist. "We know our duty—as well as our rights."

"You had no right not to inform us of the other levels as to your escape," Marcou said almost savagely. The veneer of a dozen centuries of careful

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breeding and rearing had been stripped from him by a terror for which he was utterly unprepared.

"The information is all here," Zindorff told him with sympathy. He gestured from the buttons on his desk to the wall upon which the pictures had been shown. "You see, each of us must find the way himself. The ultimate engine was very different, when we found it, from the sort of machine we had expected."

"I'M NOT sure I believe you," muttered Marcou unhappily.

"Don't be a fool," said Orella with unbecoming sharpness. "Of course Zindorff isn't lying. Zindorff—what is this machine?"

"Ourselves," said the scientist quietly. "Cremenzi, the religious philosopher, discovered the key through study of the old miracles and faith cures. There is no limit to human teleportation and survival ability once the mind is fully employed to the final cell in tune with the whole body. Until recently only a few men, lost in the clouds of history, possessed the gift. A thousand years ago it was wrongly called the 'psi' quality."

"You mean . . .?" Marcou leaned against the nearest wall, frowning as he sought to absorb this appallingly new idea. "You mean there is no transportation, no starship?"

"Each of us must provide his own," Zindorff told him.

"But we cannot—we have had neither breeding nor training for this sort of thing," cried Orella. All at once she was suppliant woman, suppliant woman through the ages. "Surely you can give us some sort of *help*?"

"Very little, I fear," said the scientist. "And now that I have told you I must leave you—for the blue planet. There is much work to do, much to be built, much to make ready." He sat down slowly in a chair behind his desk, visibly composed himself for concentration.

Marcou sprang forward from the wall, lunged around the desk—seeking to restrain Zindorff, to hold him, to obtain from him further reassurance, further aid. But he found himself staring stupidly at a scrap of white mineral cloth torn from a corner of Zindorff's robe. The scientist himself had vanished without trace.

A little later Orella came to him as he stood there, nuzzled against him, not like a lover but rather like a frightened animal seeking reassurance through physical contact with its own kind. Hesitantly her fingers moved toward the buttons before her.

"Well," she said, suddenly practical, "apparently we've got to learn how." But though her voice was steady the eyes she turned toward Marcou were utterly without hope—as were those into which she gazed.

Featured Next Issue

THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS

A Novel of Alien Earth **by SAM MERWIN, JR.**

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The WOMAN

A Novelet by LEIGH BRACKETT

CHAPTER I

Ahrian

WHAT a great day it was for everybody, when David came home from deep space. It was a day that will remain for a long while on the calendar of the McQuarrie family, marked heavily in red.

We had driven down to the spaceport to meet him—myself, and Bet, who was David's and my sister, just out of college, and David's fiancée, a Miss Lewisham. The Miss Lewisham had family but no money, and David had both, and that was as far as it went. She was one of these handsome, shallow-eyed babes as perfectly machined as a chunk of bakelite, and just as human. Bet thought she was terrific. She had spent hours getting herself up to be as like her as possible, but it was all in vain. Bet's hair still behaved like hair, and blew.

The spaceport was swarming. Interplanetary flight had long ago ceased to be a thing of breathless wonder to the populace, but star-ships were still new and rare, and the men who flew them were still heroic. Word had gone out that the *Anson McQuarrie* was due in from somewhere beyond the Pleiades, and there were thousands of people backed up behind the barricades. I remember that there were flags, and somebody had prepared a speech.

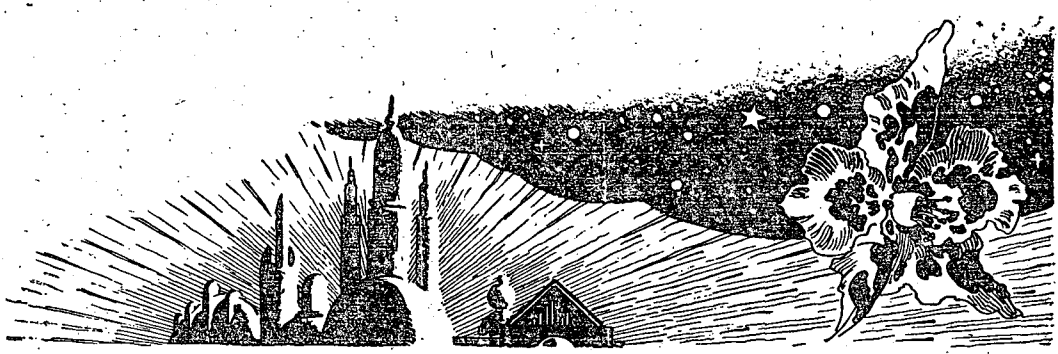
"Isn't it wonderful!" said Bet, around a lump in her throat. "And all for David."

"There are some other men on that ship, too," I said.

"Oh, you always have to be so nasty," she snapped. "David's the captain, and the owner, too. And he deserves the reception."

"Uh huh," I said, "and what's more, David himself would be the last to disagree with you."

Officials were opening a way for us, and I shoved Bet along it with the Miss Lewisham, who headed like a homing duck for the TV cameras. At about that moment a feminine voice hailed us, and Bet whirled around, crying out, "Marthe!"



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From ALTAIR

Ahrian was a fragile creature—yet beneath her feminine softness lurked the steel purpose of bitter dedication!

Her world revealed itself to me in sudden bright flashes as I plunged through space

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An extremely attractive young woman detached herself from a group of obvious reporters and joined us.

"I'm going to be quite shameless," she announced, "and presume on an old school friendship."

I liked the way she grinned and practically dared me to throw her out of the family circle. I should have done so, but didn't because of that cheeky grin, and that's how Marthe Walters came to be mixed up in this mess. I wished so desperately afterward that I had pushed her face in. But how is one to know?

Bet was offering explanations. "Marthe was a senior when I was a freshman, Rafe. Remember? That was when I was going to be a journalist." She rushed through the introductions, and memory clicked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "You're the Marthe Walters who does those profile sketches for *Public*."

"It's honest work, but it's a living."

"You've come to the right place. My brother has the devil and all of a profile."

SHE cocked her head on one side and gave me a peculiarly intelligent look. "Yours isn't so bad. And come to think of it, I've never heard of you."

"I'm the forgotten McQuarrie," I said. "The one who didn't go to space."

All this time we were being assisted onward to the place that had been reserved for the family. Bet was burbling, the Miss Lewisham was being statuesque and proud, and this bright-eyed intruder, Marthe, was thinking questions and trying to devise a politic way of asking them.

"You're David's older brother?"

"Ancient."

"And you're a McQuarrie, and you didn't go to space." She shook her head. "That's like being a fish, and refusing to swim."

"It's not Rafe's fault," said Bet, with that touch of womanly pity she could get in her voice sometimes. "How soon will he land, Rafe? I just can't wait!"

I was trying to figure out what color Marthe's eyes were. I got them pegged for blue, and then there was some change in the light or something, and they were green as sea-water.

"Surely," she said, "you didn't wash out."

"No, it was noisier than that. I crashed. It was a light plane, but it came down heavy."

"He was on his way to the spaceport from the Academy," said Bet sadly. "He had his papers and everything, and was going out on his first voyage as a junior officer. The disappointment nearly killed Father, Rafe being the oldest son and everything. But then, he still had David."

"I see," said Marthe. She smiled at me, and this time it wasn't cheeky, but the sort of smile a man would like to see more of. "I'm sorry. I thought that walking stick was pure swank."

"It is," I told her, and laughed. "I think that's what really disgusts the family—I'm healthy as a horse. I only carry the thing to remind them that I'm supposed to be frail."

They were in radio communication with the *Anson McQuarrie*. The reports of position kept coming in, and an amplifier blatted them out. Men ran around looking harried, a million voices chattered, necks craned, the tension built up. The towers of Manhattan glittered mightily in the distance. Marthe and I talked. I think we talked about her.

A great roar went up. Bet screamed in my ear. There was a perfect frenzy of sound for a few moments, and then there was silence, and in it the sky split open like tearing silk. A speck of silver came whistling down the cleft, growing rapidly, becoming a huge graceful creature with tarnished flanks and star-dust on her nose, and pride in every rivet. Oh, she was beautiful, and she settled light as a moonbeam on the landing field that had been cleared of any lesser craft. The *Anson McQuarrie*

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was home.

I noticed then that Marthe had not been watching the ship at all. She was watching me.

"You," she said, "are a rather puzzling person."

"Does that bother you?"

"I don't like a book that has the whole story on the first page."

"Good," I said. "Then you won't like David. Come along. And oh, yes, any time you want to catch up on your reading—"

"There he is!" shrieked Bet. "There's David!"

The barricades were keeping back the crowds, and officials were forming a second line of defense against the mob of reporters. We, the family, were allowed to be first with our greetings. The under-hatch had opened in that vast keel, the platform was run out, and a tall figure in absolutely impeccable uniform had emerged onto it. Bands played, thousands cheered, the TV cameras rolled, and David lifted his hand and smiled. A handsome beggar, my brother, with all the best points of the McQuarrie stock. I think he was a little annoyed when Bet flung herself up the steps and onto his neck. She mussed his collar badly.

I waved. The Miss Lewisham mounted to the platform, showing her splendid legs. She held out her arms graciously, prepared to grant David the dignified kiss due a hero from his future wife. But David gave her a horrified look as though he had forgotten all about her, and his face turned six different shades of red.

He recovered magnificently. He caught those outstretched hands and shook them warmly, at the same time getting her off to one side so smoothly that she hardly realized it. Before she could say anything, he had spoken, to the world at large, with boyish pride.

"I have seen," he said, "many strange and precious things on the worlds of other stars. And I have brought back with me the most wonderful of them all. I want you to welcome her to Earth."

Alien Challenge

PERHAPS the most inscrutable challenge confronting science fiction is the alien. We all wonder, granting the premise of life on other worlds, what forms such life will take. Will its existence be based on carbon, on silicon or on some molecular arrangement that does not as yet register any band on our spectra?

Or, if humanoid in form, what will be its nature, its purposes, its fears, its weapon, its habits, its hobbies, its ways of making love? These questions and countless others loom before every science fiction author constantly—and every so often every science fiction author seeks at least some of the answers within the speculative frame of a story.

Actually this is a challenge that must forever remain inscrutable—for no man has yet been possessed of sufficient wisdom and understanding to interpret himself fully, not to mention interpretation of his fellows. And certainly none of us has succeeded in depicting with full accuracy such everyday aliens as the cats, dogs and horses with which we are diurnally familiar.

But, being human, we keep trying. And occasionally, as in the present instance of the bride from Altair, one of us succeeds in creating a credible alien. Ahrian may be far from the true denizens of the planets of that distant star—but she is a credible, tragic and utterly fascinating creature. Thank you, Miss Brackett.

—THE EDITOR.

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Here he turned to someone who had been waiting inside the hatch, and handed her out.

I DON'T think that any of us, least of all the Miss Lewisham, caught on for a moment. We were too busy, like everybody else, staring at the little creature who was clinging to David's hand.

She seemed incredibly small and fragile to be a grown woman, and yet that is what she was, and no mistake about it. She wore a very quaint drapery of some gossamer stuff that shimmered in the sunlight, and the lovely shape of her beneath it was something to wonder at. Her skin was perfectly white and beautiful, like fine porcelain, and her little face was pointed and fey-looking, with eyebrows that swept up toward her temples like two delicate feathers. Her hair was the color of amethysts. There was a great deal of it, piled high on her head in an intricate coiffure, and the lights in it were marvelous, as though every conceivable shade of that jewel had been melted and spun together and made alive. Her eyes, slanting under those sweeping brows, were the same color, but deeper, a true purple. They looked out in great bewilderment upon this noisy alien world.

"She is from Altair," said David. "Her name is Ahrian. She is my wife."

The reactions to that last simple statement were violent and more than a little confused. Sometime before the shouting died, and while Bet was still staring like an absolute idiot at her unexpected sister-in-law, the Miss Lewisham departed, with every hair still perfectly in place. Where her temper was, I don't know. The reporters stampeded, and no one and nothing could hold them back. The TV men were in transports when David kissed his little bride from Altair. I looked down at Marthe.

"I suppose," I said, "it wouldn't be any good asking you to go away now."

She said it wouldn't be. She was shivering slightly, like a wolf that has found a fat lamb asleep under its nose. "A woman from Altair," she whispered. "This isn't a story, it's a sensation."

"It's certainly a surprise for the family!"

"Poor little thing, she looks scared to death. Whatever you feel, don't take it out on her." Marthe glanced up at me, as though a sudden thought had occurred to her. "By the way," she asked, "is your brother quite right in the head?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," I said.

Up on the platform, the focus of the excitement, the new Mrs. David McQuarrie trembled against her husband and stared with those purple enigmatic eyes at the alien hosts of a world that was not her own.

CHAPTER II

Stranger on Earth

GRIMLY we set off on the ride home. I had managed to get Bet on one side and threaten her with bodily injury if she didn't keep her mouth shut. David himself, what with the exultation of homecoming and the sensation he had created with his dramatic announcement of marriage, was flying too high to notice any of us too much. He held Ahrian in the circle of his arm as if she had been a child, and talked to her, and soothed her, and pointed out this and that interesting thing along the road.

As she looked at the houses and trees, the hills and valleys, the sun and the sky, I couldn't help being sorry for her. In my younger days I had gone, as supercargo in my father's ships, to Venus and Mars and beyond the Belt to Jupiter. I knew what it was like to walk on alien soil. And she was so far away from home that even her familiar sun was gone.

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She glanced at us now and then, with a kind of shy terror. Bet sulked and glowered, but I managed a smile, and Marthe patted Ahrian's hand. David had taught her English. She spoke it well, but with a curious rippling accent that made it sound like a foreign tongue.

Her voice was soft and low and very sweet. She did not talk much. Neither did we.

David barely noticed that we had a stranger with us. I had said vaguely that Marthe was a friend of mine, and he had nodded and forgot her. I was rather glad to have her along. There are times when families should not be alone together.

The McQuarrie place is built on top of a rise. The house is large, and was originally built almost two centuries ago, when old Anson McQuarrie founded the family fortune with a fleet of ore carriers for the Lunar mines. There are old trees around it, and a thousand acres of land, and it is one of those places that exude from every pore a discreet odor of money.

Ahrian looked at it and said dutifully.

"It is very beautiful."

"Not quite the sort of place she's used to," David remarked to us. "But she'll love it."

I wondered if she would.

We all piled out of the car, and Marthe hesitated. She had been so completely absorbed in studying Ahrian that I doubt if she had thought of her own position at all. Now the sight of our rather hulking house seemed to daunt her.

"I think maybe I better go back now," she said. "I've imposed enough, and I've got a lot to go on. I'd like to really interview them both, but this is hardly the time for it."

"Oh, no," I told her emphatically. "You're staying. Bet's got to have somebody to yak to, and it isn't going to be me. You're her old school chum, remember?"

MARTHE took a good look at Bet's furious countenance and muttered, "I have a feeling I'm going to hold this against you, Mr. McQuarrie."

She was so right. Except that I held it against myself, the other way round.

Suddenly Ahrian, who was a little distance up the walk with David, let out a quivering scream. David began to yell angrily for me. I went on to see what was the matter.

"It's only Buck," I said.

"Well, get him out of here. He's frightening Ahrian."

"She might as well get used to him now," I said, and took Buck by the collar. He was a very large dog, and one of the best I ever had. He didn't like Ahrian. I could feel him shiver, and the hair on his back bristled under my hand.

David was going to get ugly about it, and then Ahrian said, "It is that I have not before seen such a creature. It means no harm. Only it is uneasy."

She began to talk to Buck, in her own soft liquid tongue. Gradually his muscles stilled and the hackles flattened and the ears relaxed. His eyes had a puzzled look. Presently he stalked forward and laid his head in her hands.

Ahrian laughed. "You see? We are friends."

I looked at the dog. There was no joy in him. Ahrian took her small white hands from his head. Abrutly he turned and went away, running fast.

Ahrian said softly, "I have very much to learn."

"Just the same," said David, glaring at me, "you be careful with your confounded livestock." He swept Ahrian on up the walk. The door had been opened. David did the inevitable thing. He picked Ahrian up in his arms and bore her with a courtly flourish across the threshold.

"All I've got to say is," Bet snarled, "I hope they can't— I mean, I just couldn't bear it to have a little nephew with lavender hair!"

She stamped on into the house. I took

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Marthe firmly by the arm. "Bet can fix you up with suitable garments."

"What for?"

"We are having a dinner tonight, in David's honor. Formal, of course. There will be many people."

"How delightful," she said, and groaning, followed Bet.

That dinner may not have been delightful, but it certainly was not dull. The drawing rooms teemed with what Daisy Ashford would have referred to as costly people, all quite ill at ease. Ahrian, sitting at the table in the place that was to have been the Miss Lewisham's, was a little figure fashioned in some Dresden of Fairyland, dressed in a matchless tissue of pale gold and crowned with that incredibly beautiful hair.

The women didn't know how to deal with her, and the men were fascinated, and all in all it was not a successful social occasion. Late in the evening David made her sing. She had a curious stringed instrument from which she drew soft wandering music, and she sang songs of her own world that were sweet and very strange. Some of them didn't have any words. They told of the things that lie hid beyond mountains, and of the secrets oceans know, and of the long, still thoughts of deserts. But they were not the mountains or the deserts or the seas of Earth. Toward the end there came into her eyes two great crystal tears.

Soon after that I noticed that she had disappeared. David was holding the center of the stage with some thrilling recital of events beyond the stars, and it seemed to be up to me to look for her.

I found her at last, standing disconsolate on the steps that lead down from the terrace into the garden. There were many shadows in it, and the shrubs rustled in the wind, so that it must have seemed a frightening place to her. There were clouds, I remember, veiling the sky.

She turned and looked at me. "Why did you come to me?"

"I thought perhaps you might be lonely."

"There is David," she answered. "Why might I be lonely?"

I could not see her face, except as a small blurred whiteness in the gloom. "Yes," I said, "you have David. But it's still possible to be sad."

She said, "I will not be sad." I could read nothing in the tone of her voice, either.

"Ahrian, you must try to understand us. We were upset today, because we hadn't expected you, and—well—" I tried, rather lamely, to explain how things had stood. "It wasn't anything personal. You're part of the family now, and we'll do all we can to make you welcome."

"The little one—she is full of anger."

"She' just a kid. Give her time. A month from now she'll be wanting to dye her hair to match yours." I held out my hand. "We have a custom here of clasping hands as a token of friendship. Will you take mine, Ahrian?"

SHE hesitated, a long, long moment. Then she said gravely, as if it were something I must remember, "I do not hate you, Rafe." She put her hand in mine, a fleeting touch as light and chill as the falling of a snowflake. Then she shivered. "It is cold on your world when the darkness comes."

"Is it always warm on yours?" We started toward the house, and looking down at her beside me, I thought I could understand why David had not been able to let her go.

She answered softly. "Yes, it is warm, and the moons are like bright lamps in the sky. The spires and the rooftops glisten, and there are dark leaves that shake out perfume—"

She broke off, too quickly, and said no more.

"You must love David very deeply to have come all this long way home with him."

"Love is indeed a great force," she murmured.

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We went inside, and David claimed her again.

For several days I did not see much of Ahrian. I handle the financial end of the McQuarrie business, not because I like it but because I have to do something to justify the money I spend. David had brought back an invaluable cargo, some of it from worlds that, like Ahrian's, had never been touched before. I think we cleared around a million dollars on it, over and above the cost of the voyage.

I was so busy that I hardly had time to see Marthe. Strange, how important it had become to see Marthe, so quickly and without anything being said about it. She had left our house, of course, in high spirits over the inside stuff she had got for her articles. I had said, "When will I see you again?" And she had answered, "Any time." That's how it was—any time we could possibly make it.

One night, when by chance the family were all together at dinner, Ahrian said shyly, "David, I have been thinking—"

Instantly he was all attention. He really did seem to adore her. I will admit that I had a few sneaking suspicions, or perhaps it was only a puzzled wonder, since David so far in his life had had only three loves—star-ships, himself, and the McQuarrie name, in that order. But his manner with Ahrian appeared to show that he had found the fourth.

"In my home," said Ahrian, "I had a small place that was my own, in which I found much pleasure in fashioning little gifts for those I loved. Only a very small place, David—might I have one here?"

David smiled at her and said that she might have anything there was on Earth or the other planets, except the ugly clothes that might be all right for Earthlings but were not for her. Ahrian smiled back, asking, still with that shy hesitance, for some gem stones of small value, and some fine wires of platinum and gold.

"Diamonds," said David. "Emeralds. All you like."

"No. I will have the crystal and the zircon. Uncut, please. I wish to shape them myself."

"With those tiny hands? Very well, darling. I'll have them here tomorrow."

Ahrian thanked him gravely and glanced across at me. "I am learning very quickly, Rafe. I have seen all your horses. They are a wonder to me, so large and beautiful."

"If you like," I said, "I could teach you to ride."

"Perhaps on that very little one?"

I laughed and explained to her why a three-week foal was not suitable for that. David said fiercely that he was not going to have Ahrian trampled to death by one of my lubberly beasts, and forbade anything of the sort.

After dinner I got Bet alone and asked her how she was making out with Ahrian.

"Oh, I suppose it isn't her fault, but she gives me the creeps, Rafe! She goes drifting around the place like a funny little shadow, and sometimes the way she looks at you . . . I get the feeling she's studying me—way deep inside, I mean. I don't like it—and I don't like her!"

"Well, try to be as nice as you can. The poor little critter must be having a hard enough time of it. Remember we're as alien to her as she is to us."

"She wanted to come," said Bet, without pity. I left her, and went off to keep a date with Marthe. . . .

CHAPTER III

Gifts of—Love

DAVID fixed up a wonderful workshop for Ahrian, where she could make pretty trinkets to her heart's content. She would remain there for hours, humming softly to herself, letting no

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one, not even David, in to see what she was doing. She worked for weeks, and then one evening she came in to dinner with the pleased air of a child who has done a nice thing. I saw that she was carrying some light burden in a fold of her gown.

She was wearing a kind of tiara that went very well with her masses of amethystine hair and her curious little face. It was a delicate thing, exquisitely wrought of mingled wires of platinum and gold woven into a strange design of flowers and set with a flawless crystal that she had cut herself in a way that I had never seen a crystal cut before.

She strewed her small burden glittering on the tablecloth. "See! I have made a gift for everyone. You must wear them, or I shall be so unhappy!"

They were beautiful. For David and me she had made rings—for, as she said, we did not wear jewels as the men of her world did, and so she had had to be content with rings. For Bet there was a necklace, of a sort that no girl could resist if the Devil himself had given it to her.

There was a chorus of astonished comment. David told Ahrian that she could make a fortune for herself if she would make and sell these things to the world. Ahrian shook her head.

"No. These are gifts and must be fashioned with a meaning from the heart. Otherwise I could not make them."

The stones were all most curiously cut.

It was exactly eight days after that giving of gifts that the thing happened.

David was away on some business in the city. Marthe was spending the week end—Ahrian seemed an odd kind of chaperone, but we thought she would serve—and we had been taking a stroll in a wood that there is north of the house.

All of a sudden we heard the sound of someone screaming.

We started to run back toward the house. A scream has no identity, but somehow I knew this one came from Bet. Marthe got some distance ahead of me, and then she began to scream, too. There were other sounds mixed with the screaming. I made all the speed I could. Where the wood ended, there was a wide stretch of turf, with the house way at the back of it and here and there apple trees that were part of an old orchard.

Bet had got herself up into one of these old thorny veterans. Her clothes were torn and there were dabbles of blood on her face and dress. Her cries had ceased to have any meaning. In a minute she was going to faint.

MY BIG DOG Buck was under the tree. He leaped and sprang, and his teeth flashed like knives in the sunlight, snapping shut no more than a short inch beneath the limb Bet huddled on. He moaned as he leaped, a strange and dreadful sound as though he were being tortured and were pleading for release.

I shouted his name. He turned his head, gave me one pitiful look, and then he went back to trying to kill my sister. I was carrying the heavy blackthorn stick I used when I walked in the country. I hit him with the knob of it. Poor Buck! He was dead in a minute or two, as quick as I could make it, and he never tried to defend himself. I caught Bet as she tumbled out of the apple tree, and Marthe and I between us got her to the house.

Ahrian was there. She gave a little cry of horror and bent her head, and I remember the flash of crystal on her forehead in the dim hall. Servants came and took Bet. Marthe ran off somewhere to be sick, and I called town for David and a doctor.

For a while I was busy with brandy and restoratives. Presently Bet came around, more terrified than hurt. Her scratches had come mostly from climbing into the tree. She said she had been looking for Marthe and me, when suddenly Buck had appeared out of nowhere and, for no reason at all, tried to tear her throat out.

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"I never did him any harm," she whimpered. "I like him, and he liked me. He must have gone mad."

I was glad when the doctor came and put her under for a while. Buck was taken away for autopsy. He was not rabid, nor was there a sign of any other disease. I had that stick burned up. I couldn't forget the way Buck had moaned, the way he had looked at me before he died. David had some bitter words to say, and I nearly hit him, which was unfair under the circumstances.

Anyway, the dog was dead, and Bet was all right. In time everybody's nerves calmed down, and even Bet got tired of talking about it. David had a birthday coming up. Ahrian made great preparations, asking us all incessant questions about how things should be done according to our customs, and adding a few of her own.

David liked lavishness, so there was another big dinner and a lot of people. Ahrian had gained confidence, and everybody had had time to gossip themselves out about her by now. It was a much more successful occasion than the first. Even some of the women decided not to hate her.

Marthe and I retired into the library for a little quiet love-making. Between times we discussed getting married. Through the closed doors we heard Ahrian singing for a while, not the longing heartsick things she had sung before, but something gay and wicked. When she stopped, there was only the usual buzz and chatter of people.

Some time went by, I don't know how much. Without any warning a terrible racket arose of horses squealing, and of yelling, and I remember thinking that the barns must be on fire.

I got outside in a hurry. The guests were beginning to pour out onto the veranda and peer curiously into the darkness to see what the trouble was. Among them, I noticed Ahrian with a cloak around her.

The stables and the big open paddocks are some distance from the house. Halfway there I saw Jamieson, my head groom, running toward me.

"It's Miss Bet," he gasped, white-faced and shaking. "Hurry!"

I hurried, but there was a cold, sick feeling in me that told me hurrying was no use.

There was an old brood mare, gentle as a kitten, long past her usefulness and pensioned off. She was Bet's especial pet, and old Hazel would muster up a stiff-legged canter from wherever she was to come and snuffle over her for sugar-lumps.

All the big floodlights were on. There was a confusion of men and horses and noise. Old Hazel was pressed up against the paddock fence, her coat dark with sweat, trembling in every muscle. There was blood on her legs. Bet was dead. In her long white party dress and her silver sandals she had come all the way down there and gone into the paddock, and the old mare had trampled her. It didn't make any sense at all. I kneeled there beside her in the dirt, and the necklace of zircons that Ahrian had given her glittered among the splashes of blood.

The men had got ropes on the mare now, and she began to thrash and scream like a crazy thing. Somebody handed me a gun, and I used it, all the time knowing that the poor old beast had no more killing in her than Buck had had.

It made no kind of sense. But Bet was dead.

It was a fine ending to a gay evening.

You know how it is with a kid sister. Sometimes she's a pest, and sometimes she's ridiculous, and she always talks too much, but even so— And it was such an ugly way to die.

David was going down and shoot every horse in the place. When I stopped him, he turned on me. There was a bad scene. They were my animals. One had tried, and one had succeeded, and that made me practically a murderer. I let it go, because he was hard hit, and

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so was I. But from then on there was a wall between me and my brother, and the hate he had against me over Bet's death seemed to grow day by day. I couldn't understand why. It seemed almost insane, but whatever shortcomings David had, insanity was not one of them.

We buried Bet, and no one wept more bitterly than Ahrian. She was David's loving comforter, and for the first time I was genuinely glad she was there.

CHAPTER IV

Star Dreams

ON THE night after the funeral I began to dream.

At first the dreams were brief and vague. But they got longer and clearer, until my days became nightmares and my nights an unbearable hell. Sleep became a torture. I dreamed of space.

The McQuarries are spacemen. From old Anson down the sons have flown the ships, and the daughters have married men who could fly ships, and the McQuarrie flag has been carried a long, long way. As far as I know, we never did anything more sinful than to get there first, but the McQuarrie ships have gained and held the richest cream of the trade between the worlds, and now they are breaking the trails between the stars.

I was a McQuarrie, and the oldest son to boot, and I had to go to space. That was a thing as inevitable as sunrise, and as little questioned. I went.

Now I dreamed of space. I was caught in it, quite alone, between the blackness and the blaze, with nothing above or below or around me but the cruel bright eyes of far-off suns to note my fall. I fell, through the millions of silent miles, turning over and over, voiceless, helpless, and when I had done falling the stars looked just the same, and it seemed I had not moved. I knew that I was going to fall forever and never be allowed to die, and at the end of forever the stars would not have changed.

They were ghastly dreams. Opiates only made them worse. I spent whole days riding, until both my horse and I were weary enough to drop, so that I might sleep. It was no good. I tried drinking, and that was no help either.

There was guilt in those dreams. One part of them recurred over and over—myself, knowing about the unending doom that waited for me out there beyond the sky, and running away from it, running like a hunted hare. Everywhere I turned, there was my father with his arms stretched wide, barring the way. His face was turned from me, and my fear lest he should suddenly see me and know the truth was as great in a different way as my fear of space. So I would creep away, but in the end there was no escape, and I was falling, falling down the timeless universe.

I didn't see Marthe. I didn't have the heart to see anybody. I began to think of death. It seemed preferable to a padded cell.

David relented enough to be worried. Ahrian hovered over me sweetly. I didn't tell them anything, of course, except that I was having trouble sleeping.

Then, curiously enough, Ahrian got mixed up in my nightmares. Not Ahrian herself, but her world, the world of Altair she had left for David.

THAT was strange, because she had spoken very little about her world. She had, in fact, refused to talk about it. David had not discussed it either, except from the standpoint of trade. Yet here I was, seeing it in detail, in sudden bright flashes that came without reason in the midst of my horrible plunging through space. I could see every leaf and flower, each single turret of a pale and gleaming city of which I knew the streets as well as I knew my

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own woods. I saw in detail the quaint shapes of the roof-tops with the carving on them, and the wide plain of some feathery grass, the color of blue smoke, that sloped away toward an opalescent sea. I knew the separate colors of the several moons, and the particular perfume that came on the wind at the sinking of Altair.

This was so extremely odd that I mentioned it to Ahrian, not, of course, telling her that I had had other dreams as well. She gave a little start and said, "How strange!"

I went on to tell her some of the details, and suddenly she laughed and said, "But it is not so very strange, after all. I have told you all those things."

"When?" I said.

"Some few nights ago. You had had a number of drinks, Rafe, and perhaps you do not remember. I talked to you, thinking that it might help you to sleep, and it was of my own world that I talked."

That seemed as good an explanation as any; in fact, the only one. So I let it drop, and after that I dreamed no more of Ahrian's world.

I felt wretched about Marthe, but this wasn't a thing you dragged someone else into, especially someone you cared about. I put her off, and fought, not very gallantly, a fight I knew I was losing. I began to have blank periods during my waking hours. Once I found my horse on the edge of a cliff, with the dirt already sliding from under him. Another time I was looking at the sharp blade of my big pocket knife that had drawn a tentative line of red across my wrist.

I stopped riding. I stopped driving my car. I locked up all my guns and made Jamieson hide the key. I knew I ought to die, but I wasn't quite ready, not quite. . . .

Marthe came one day, unannounced and uninvited. She came into the house and found me, and politely shut the door in everyone's face. Then she came and stood in front of me.

"I want the truth, Rafe. What's gone wrong?"

I said something about not having felt well, assured her I was all right, thanked her for coming, and tried to put her out. She wouldn't be put.

"Look at me, Rafe. Is it because you don't love me?" She made me look at her, and presently she smiled and said, "I didn't think so."

I caught hold of her, then. After a while she whispered, "There's something evil in this house. I felt it when I came in the door. Something wicked!"

"Nonsense," I told her.

She clung to it, though, and cried a little, and swore at me because I had worried her. Then she stepped back and said flatly:

"You look like the devil. What is it Rafe?"

"I don't quite know." Suddenly, perhaps because of what she had said, I wanted to be out of that house. Irrational? But I wasn't being rational then. "Let's take a walk. Maybe the air will clear my head."

We didn't go far. The last few weeks had worn me down badly, and every crack and jar I had in my frame was plaguing me. By the time we made it to a grassy knoll well away from the house and sat down, Marthe was looking genuinely frightened.

I hadn't meant to tell her anything. I had determined not to tell her. And, of course, I did tell her. I don't know what she made of it, because it wasn't very coherent, the dream part, but she got quite white and flung her arms around me.

"You need a psychiatrist," she said, "and a good doctor."

"I've had a doctor. And a psychiatrist isn't any good unless you're hiding something from yourself. I'm not."

"But there must be some reason for the dreams."

"It isn't any buried guilt. Listen, Marthe, I'll tell you something, and that will make two people in the world who know it. Maybe you won't think much

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of me after you hear it, but I'd have to tell you sometime and it better be now. That time my plane crashed, on the way to the spaceport. I crashed it myself. Deliberately, intentionally crashed it."

HER eyes widened. Before she could say anything, I rushed on.

"I never wanted to go to space. When I was a little kid, and my father would talk to me about it, I didn't want to go. I liked Earth. I liked dogs and horses and prowling in the woods. Above all, I resented being forced into a set mold that didn't fit me, just because generations of McQuarries had been poured into that mold. My father and I had some bitter words over that, when I was little.

"When I got older I still felt that way, but I'd discovered it wasn't any use to fight. Besides, I liked my father. You know how some men are—pride, family tradition, all that business. Space was his life. It meant more to him to have me be a spaceman than it did to me not to be one. So I went. I didn't like it. I hated it, as a matter of fact. But I kept my mouth shut. Then, coming back from Mars on that first voyage, we lost a man.

"He'd gone outside the hull to repair something, and his magnetic grapples didn't hold, and he drifted off. I saw him through the port, growing smaller and smaller as we left him behind, until he disappeared. You know how fast a spaceship moves at full acceleration? Even by the time we got the boats out it was too late. He's still there. He'll always be there.

"After that, I had a horror of space, the way some people used to have for the sea. It wasn't that I was afraid of getting killed, it was the emptiness, the dark and the cold and the silence, and the *waiting*. I hate being cooped in, and the ship was like an iron coffin. I tried to fight it. I made two more voyages, and I was sick for months after the second one. I didn't tell anybody why. Finally I went up to the Academy to get my ticket, and my father was proud and happy. Blast people's pride and their ideas that their children have to lofe just what they do! He gave me a berth on his flagship.

"I couldn't tell him the truth, and I couldn't go. I didn't have any right to—to ask men to depend on me and then maybe— So I crashed my plane. If I died, I wanted to do it decently and alone. If I didn't, I figured I'd get smashed up enough so that I couldn't pass a space-physical, and that would be that, with everybody's honor still intact. I guess God was on my side. Anyway, I judged the impact just right. After that, David carried the torch, and my father died happy."

We didn't talk for a while. I sat turning round and round on my finger the ring that Ahrian had given me. Presently Marthe said, "That explains it."

"What?"

"The look I saw in your face when David's ship came in. No regret, no envy. You didn't want to be where he was. But you were as proud of him as Bet was."

"He likes to strut a bit," I said, "but the son-of-a-gun is just as good as he thinks he is. Maybe better. I've talked to his men. . . . Well, what about me?"

She said some things that did me more good than any psychiatry, and for the first time in weeks I began to think perhaps there was some hope in the world. We made up a little for all the time we had lost, and then Marthe became thoughtful again.

"Rafe, you started once to say something about Ahrian. Where does she come into this?"

"Nowhere, really." I told her about seeming to see Ahrian's world. "Turned out she'd described it to me, and imagination did the rest."

"I wonder."

She sat still and intent, and then she questioned me about those particular dreams, what Ahrian had said, what I

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had said, what I remembered. Finally I demanded to know what she was getting at.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Rafe, that all this trouble has come onto you since Ahrian came? All the tragic things there are no real explanations for—Buck, and the old mare, and Bet going down into the paddock in her white formal, a thing no woman in her right mind would do, and at that hour of the night! And now these nightmares that are driving you to—to—Oh, you didn't tell me that part of it, but I can see it in your face! It's all wrong, Rafe. It's all without reason."

"But what on earth could Ahrian have to do with it? That's just wild talk, Marthe."

"Is it? How do we know what the people of her world can do, what powers they may have?"

"But she loves David! Why would she want to destroy his family?"

"How do you know she loves him? Did she ever tell you so?"

"Yes." Then Ahrian's words came back to me, and I corrected myself. "No, come to think of it. She only said love was a great force. Hang it all, though, she came with him, didn't she? All the way to Earth."

FOR some reason, this talk was disturbing me deeply. It oppressed me, in that open empty place, and gave me a sense that someone was listening and that Marthe had better not say any more—for her own sake.

"That's all nonsense," I said roughly. "People can't send dreams on each other, or make people do things, or—or kill by remote control."

"People like us—no. But Ahrian isn't —people. I'm afraid of her, Rafe. She's strange, inside. Bet said the same thing."

"Woman talk."

"Maybe. Or maybe sometimes we're nearer the truth than men because we aren't ashamed to rely on the instincts God gave us. She's evil. She's filled the house with death."

Marthe shivered as though a cold wind had struck her, and suddenly she reached out and tore Ahrian's ring off my finger and threw it far away into the deep grass.

"I don't want anything of her about you. Nothing!"

Then it was my turn to shiver. Because the minute that ring was gone, so were the oppression and the vague fear, and my screwed-up nerves began to slacken off again.

Still I would not believe. I knew the power of suggestion, and considering the state I was in, none of my reactions would be worth a plugged nickel anyway.

"I still say this is all nonsense, Marthe. Ahrian's never shown the slightest sign of having any special 'power.' She's never been anything but sweet and friendly, and she follows David around like a spaniel. And there just isn't the shadow of a motive."

"I know how we can find out."

I stared at her. "How?"

"Those dreams you had of Ahrian's world. She couldn't have described all the details to you, and you couldn't have imagined all the rest of them exactly right. Someone who had been there would know. If the dreams were wrong, then Ahrian told the truth and they were nothing worse than dreams. But if they were right—*all* right—then they weren't dreams but memories from Ahrian's own mind, mixed in with the awful things she was sending to torture you."

I remembered that I hadn't had a single glimpse of that world since I mentioned it to Ahrian, which seemed an odd coincidence.

"Even so, how could she know how I felt about space? How could she— Oh, all right. We'll go ask David."

"No, not David! Not anyone who has anything to do with her. Besides, if she has some deep reason to hate David, *he* wouldn't be likely to tell us, would he?"

"So that's it. Don't you think may-

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be your reporter's mind is running away with you?"

"I'm trying to save your neck, you stubborn fool!" she snarled, between rage and tears.

I got up. "Come on, then. There's Griffith—he's observer on the *Anson McQuarrie,* and I know him fairly well." It occurred to me suddenly that Griffith hadn't been around since the night of the *Anson McQuarrie's* landing, and I wondered why, since he had always been a good friend of David's. For some reason, that unimportant fact made me as curious as a woman to know why.

Marthe's car was in the drive. Ahrian called to us from the terrace, looking very lovely with her filmy skirts blowing around her and her hair full of those incredible purple gleamings in the sunlight. Marthe said she was going to take me for a drive, and Ahrian said it would do me good. They both smiled, and we drove away.

"Does she always wear that tiara?" asked Marthe.

"I don't know. She wears it a lot. Why?"

"It's extremely bad taste in the daytime."

"Part of her native costume, I reckon."

"She didn't have it when she came."

"No, she made it— Oh, who cares!" I yawned and went to sleep. I slept like a baby and never dreamed of anything. I was still asleep when Marthe stopped at the address in the city I had given her and only woke when she shook me half out of the car.

CHAPTER V

About Altair

GRIFFITH was home. Spacemen are usually home between voyages, with their shoes off and their feet up, getting acquainted with their wives and kids. He seemed glad to see me, but not too glad. He asked how everything was, and I said, "Fine," and he said he'd been meaning to come up but he'd been too busy, and we both knew that neither statement was true. Then he said awkwardly that he was sorry about Bet, and I thanked him. When he couldn't think of any more ways to stall, he asked me what he could do for me.

"Well," I said, "my fiancée is wild to see the pictures you shot on the last voyage. New worlds, and all that." I explained to him who she was. "She's thinking of doing an article—how a special observer works, how the records are turned over to the government and the scientific bodies, and so on. I thought, as a special favor, you might be willing to show her the reels."

"Oh," he said, almost with a sigh of relief. "Sure, I'll be glad to."

He took us off to a small building at the rear of the house, where he had his photo lab and a projection room. He found the reels he wanted while chattering about some fine astronomical stuff that he'd been given an award for. Marthe asked him all the questions she could think of about his work, taking notes in a business-like way. The projector began to hum. We watched.

The reels were magnificent. Griffith knew his job. Interstellar space came alive before us. Nebulae, clusters, unknown Suns, glittering star streams, swept across the tridimensional screen in perfect reproduction of color.

We watched strange solar systems plunge toward us, and then the slow unveiling of individual planets as the *Anson McQuarrie* sank toward them. Some were dead and barren, some furiously alive, and some were peopled, not always by anything approaching the human. Each had its spectrum analysis and an exhaustive list of what ores and minerals might be found there, also atmosphere content, gravity, types and aspects of native flora and fauna.

In the fascination of watching, I al-

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most forgot what I came for. Then—

It was there. The world, the country of my dream—Ahrian's world. Each leaf and flower and blade of grass, each shading of color, the gleaming city with the curious roofs, the plain that swept toward the opalescent sea.

I felt very sick and strange. I'm not sure what happened after that, but presently I was back in Griffith's house and Marthe was feeding me brandy. I asked for more, and when I stopped shaking I turned to Griffith, who was much upset.

"That was the second world of Altair," I said. "The home world of my brother's wife."

"Yes," said Griffith.

"What happened there?" I got up and went close to him, and he stepped back a little. "What happened between my brother and Ahrian?"

"You better ask David," he muttered and tried to turn away. I caught him.

"Tell me," I said. "Bet's already dead, so it's too late for her. But there's David—and me. For God's sake, Griff, you used to be his friend!"

"Yes," said Griffith slowly, "I used to be. I told him not to do what he did, but you know David." He made an angry, indecisive gesture, and then he looked at me. "She's such a little thing. How did she— I mean—"

"Never mind. Just tell me what David did to her. She didn't come with him of her own free will, did she?"

"No. Oh, he tried to make out that she did, but everybody knew better. To this day I don't know exactly what the deal was, but her people needed something, a particular chemical or drug, I think, and they must have needed it badly. The ship, of course, was heavily stocked with all sorts of chemicals and medical supplies—you know how useful David has found them before in establishing good relations with other races.

"If it isn't their kids, it's their cattle, or a crop blight, or polluted water, and they're always grateful when you can fix things up, especially the primitives. Well, Ahrian's people are far from primitive, but I guess they'd run out of the source for whatever it was. David was mighty secretive about the whole thing."

He hesitated, and I prodded him. "What you're trying to say is that David gave them the chemicals or drugs they needed in exchange for Ahrian. Bought her, in fact."

Griffith nodded. He seemed to feel a personal sense of shame about it, as though the act of service under David had made him a party to the crime.

"Blackmailed her would be closer to the truth," he said. "The ugliest part of it was that Ahrian was already pledged . . . At least, that's what I heard. Anyway, no, she didn't come of her own free will."

I THINK, if I had had David's neck between my hands then, I would have broken it. How evil a mess could a man make? And where were you going to put justice?

Marthe said to Griffith, "Did her people have any unusual abilities? It's very important, Mr. Griffith."

"Their culture is very complex, and we weren't there long enough to study it in detail. Also, there was the language barrier. But I'm pretty sure they're telepaths—many races are, you know—though to what extent I couldn't say."

"Telepaths," said Marthe softly, and looked at me. "Mr. Griffith, do the women there wear a sort of tiara, shaped like—" She described Ahrian's headgear minutely, including the oddly cut crystal. "Habitually, I mean."

He stared at her as though he thought it was just like a woman to worry about fashions at a time like this. "Honestly, Miss Walters, I didn't notice. Both sexes go in for jewelry, and nearly all of them make it themselves, and nobody could keep track—" He halted, apparently struck by a sudden memory. "I did see a marriage ceremony, though, where

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little crowns like that were used as we use rings. The man and woman exchanged them, and as near as I could figure the words the rite was called something like the One-Making."

"Thank you," said Marthe. "Thank you very much. Now I think I'd better get Rafe home."

I said something to Griffith, I'm not sure what, but he shook hands with me and seemed relieved. I sat in the car, thinking, and Marthe drove, not back toward the house, but to her apartment. She told me she'd be back in a minute and went off, taking the keys with her. I sat thinking, and my thoughts were not good. Marthe returned, carrying a small suitcase.

"What's that for?" I demanded.

"I'm staying with you."

"The devil you are!"

She faced me, with a look as level as a steel blade and just as unyielding. "You mean more to me than propriety, or my good name, or even my own skin. Is that clear? I am staying with you until this business is finished."

I roared at her. I pleaded with her. I explained that if Ahrian were out for me, she would be out for Marthe too, if she got in the way. I told her she'd only make it harder for me, worrying about her.

All the time I was roaring, pleading, and explaining, Marthe was driving out of town, immovable, maddening, and wonderful. Finally I gave up. I couldn't throw her out of the car. Even if I had, it wouldn't have prevented her coming.

She spoke at last. "Of course, you know there's a simple solution to all this—simple, logical, and safe."

"What?"

"Go away out of Ahrian's reach, and let David take his own consequences."

"He deserves it," I said savagely.

"But you won't go away."

"How can I, Marthe?" And I began to yell at her all over again because *she* wouldn't go.

"All right, that's settled. Now let's start thinking. Obviously, we can't go to the police."

"Hardly." It was frightening to consider what a hard-boiled cop would make out of a woman who had lavender hair and performed witchcraft. "You believe that tiara Ahrian wears has something to do with her—well, her power over other people's minds?"

"Possibly. I don't know. That's just it, Rafe—we don't *know*, and so we have to be suspicious of everything."

I remembered the unexplainable sensation I had had when Marthe threw that ring away. Could it have been a contact, a sort of focal point to concentrate the energy of her thought-waves which were, perhaps, amplified and controlled by the aid of that mesh of gold and platinum wires and that strangely faceted crystal? I remembered also the necklace of zircons that glittered on Bet's throat, the night she died.

These gifts must be fashioned with a meaning from the heart . . .

"I don't know what we're going to do, Rafe. Do you?"

"Face them with it, I suppose. Face them both. Drag it out in the open, anyway."

Marthe sighed, and we drove on in gloomy silence.

CHAPTER VI

The Last Magic

IT WAS dark when we reached the house. Ahrian welcomed us with little cries of delight.

"I am so happy you have brought Marthe back with you. It has been too long since we have seen her."

"She's staying for a while," I said.

"How very nice. Since the little one is gone, I am lonely with no woman to talk to. Come, I will see that all is well in the room of guests."

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"Where's David?" I asked.

"Oh, he has gone into the city and will not be back tonight. And my heart is sad, for I think that he has gone to talk of another voyage."

She took Marthe away. I followed, on the pretext of making sure that Marthe had everything she needed, and stayed until the arrival of the maid. Then I went and changed for dinner, cursing David.

I got a word alone with Marthe before we went down. "We'd better wait," I said. "I want to tackle them together. It's the only way I know to put David on his guard."

"Has he mentioned another voyage to you?" Marthe wanted to know.

I shook my head. "But then, he seldom mentions anything to me any more."

"Ahrian's doing."

There didn't seem to be any doubt about that. David and I had never exactly loved one another, but there had certainly never been any real ill feeling between us, either. Since Bet's death, all that had been changed.

Ahrian put herself out to be nice to Marthe. If we hadn't know what we knew, it would have been a delightful evening. Instead, it was rather horrible. All the time I was remembering how I had felt out there on the hill and wondering how much Ahrian knew, or suspected, and what she might be going to do about it.

All at once she cried out, "Oh Rafe, you have lost your ring!"

I told her some reasonably plausible lie. "I'm awfully sorry, Ahrian. You must make me another some time."

She smiled. "There will be no need for that. Wait." She ran off. Marthe and I looked at each other, not daring to speak. Presently Ahrian came back, presumably from her work room, carrying a cushion made of silk.

"See? I have made these for you both—a betrothal gift."

On the cushion were two rings, identical in design, one large, one small. The zircons made a pale glittering, like two wicked eyes that watched us.

"Will you not exchange them now? I should be so happy!"

Marthe was going to say something violent. I gave her a look that shut her up and thanked Ahrian profusely. It was one of those things. If she knew we suspected her and her gifts, that was that. But if she didn't know, I didn't want her to find out just yet.

"But," I said, "they are too beautiful for mere gifts. We'll save them for the wedding, Ahrian. We were planning on a double ring ceremony anyway, and these will be perfect. Won't they, Marthe?"

"Oh, yes," she said.

AHRIAN beamed like a happy child, and murmured that her little trinkets weren't worthy of such an honor, and in that moment I began to doubt the whole crazy story again. No one could look so guileless and innocent and sweet as Ahrian did, and be guilty of the things we thought she was.

Marthe must have seen me wavering, because she said, "Rafe, darling, put them away where they'll be quite safe. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them before the wedding."

I took them up to my room and hid them in the farthest back corner of a bureau drawer under a pile of shirts. While I was up there alone, the most awful temptation came over me to put the big one on my finger—just to look at it, to admire the sparkle of the queerly cut stone and the wonderful filigree work of the band. What harm could there be in a ring?

I guess it was the very strength of that compulsion that saved me. I got scared. I slammed the drawer shut, locked it, and threw the key out the window. Then I turned around to find Marthe standing in the doorway.

"I wouldn't have let you put it on," she whispered. "But you see, Rafe? You see how right we were!"

I began to shake a bit. We started

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downstairs again, and Marthe said in my ear, "She knows. I'm sure she knows."

I agreed with her, and I was afraid. It shamed me to be afraid of such a frail little creature, but I was.

Marthe and I were both relieved when it came time to go to bed. It freed us from the weird necessity of making conversation with Ahrian. I had no intention of sleeping, but it was good to be away from her. Marthe's room was down the hall from mine, farther than I liked but plenty close enough to hear her if she called me.

I told her to leave the door open and yell like the devil if anything—anything at all—seemed wrong to her. I left mine open, too, and sat down in a chair where I could see the lighted hall. I wished I had a gun, but I didn't dare leave Marthe for all the time it would take to rouse out Jamieson and get the key. I picked out the heaviest stick I had and kept it in my hand.

The house was quiet, and nothing happened. The huge relic of a clock that stood on the stair landing chimed peacefully every fifteen minutes, and every hour it counted off the strokes in a deep, soft voice. I think the last time I heard it was half-past two. I didn't mean to sleep. I had purposely drunk nothing but black coffee all evening. But I had been so long without sleep!

I remember getting up and walking down the hall to Marthe's door and glancing in at her, curled up in the big bed. After that things got dim. I don't believe that I slept very deeply, or very long, but it was enough. I dreamed with a terrible vividness of Marthe. She was standing in the garden, wrapped in a plaid bathrobe, and she was in danger, very great danger, and she needed me.

Starting up out of the chair, I listened for a moment. The house was silent, except for the clock ticking gently to itself on the landing. I ran down the hall and into Marthe's room. At first I thought she was still there, and then I saw that the shape in the bed was only a mockery of tumbled blankets. I called her. There was no answer. Calling, I ran down through the house, and there was no answer at all until I came out on the terrace above the shadowy garden. Then I heard her say my name.

She was standing in a patch of moonlight with the plaid robe wrapped around her, and her face was white as death. In a minute I had my arms around her and she was sobbing, asking if I were safe.

"I must have been dreaming, Rafe, but I thought you were somewhere out here, hurt, maybe dying."

She was in a terrible fright, and so was I. Because I knew who had sent those dreams—easy dreams to send, without any aids to telepathy, since with each of us the thought of danger to the other was right on top of our minds, conscious and screaming.

I wanted out of that garden.

WE WENT up the steps together and onto the wide terrace, in that clear, white, damnable moonlight. From the long doors that opened into the library David stepped and barred our way. He held a heavy double-barreled shotgun, and at that range he couldn't miss.

David.

He hadn't gone to town. He had been in his room all this time—waiting. His eyes were wide open, empty and bright, reflecting the cold fire of the moon.

Ahrian was with him.

I made some futile gesture of getting Marthe behind me, and I cried out, "David!" He turned his head a very little, like a man who hears a sound far off, and his brow puckered, but he did not speak.

Ahrian said softly, "I am sorry that it must be so, Rafe and Marthe. You are blameless, and you have been kind. If only Marthe had not sensed what was within me . . . But now it must be finished here, tonight."

"Ahrian," I said, and the twin black barrels of the shotgun watched me, and the stone of David's ring sparkled

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against the stock. "David did a wicked thing. We know about it—but does it give you the right to kill us all? Bet, and Marthe. . . ."

"I made a promise to my gods," she whispered. "I had a mother and father, a brother, a sister—and more than all of them, though I loved them dearly, there was one who would have been my other self."

"I'll take you back," I said. "I'll send a ship out to Altair—only let Marthe go!"

"Could I go back as I am, as he has made me? Could I find my life again, with the blood that is already on me? No. I will take from David everything that he loves, even space itself, and in the end I will tell him how and why. Then—I will die."

"All right. All right, Ahrian. But why Marthe? She can't stop you. If David kills me, that's enough. He'll be tried for murder, the whole story will come out, and that will be the end of him whether he's convicted or not."

Ahrian smiled, a tender thing of ineffable sadness. "Marthe is speaking within herself, words that you should hear. Her body wishes much to live, but her heart says, 'Not without him,' and her heart is stronger. No, Rafe. If she lives, she will slip David out of the cage I have built for him. Now let us stop torturing each other!"

Her face contracted in a spasm of pain. She turned her head toward the motionless effigy of a man who stood beside her, and I saw the gun go up, and I knew this was the finish.

I shouted his name once more, pure reflex, and shoved Marthe aside as far as I could. David was twenty-five or thirty feet away. I bent over and began to run toward him. I didn't know why. It was hopeless, but it was all I could think of to do. The distance looked like thirty miles—and then I heard him moan. He was moaning the way old Buck had moaned that day, and his head was pulled back as though he were straining away from something. I knew he didn't *want* to kill me, even then.

Ahrian whispered. The crystal glowed in the moonlight, and there was in her face a magnificent and awful strength. David gave a low wail of agony. The cords stood out on the backs of his hands. The eyes of the woman from Altair blazed like purple stars. The gunstock settled into place, and David's finger curled in on the trigger.

Someone sped by me, off to one side and going like the wind. Someone in a plaid robe, headed not for David, but for Ahrian.

There was a scream, I don't know whose. Maybe mine. The gun let off, both barrels, right above my shoulder, and the hot metal seared my hand where I shoved the thing up at the last second so that it hit nothing but the tree tops. David groaned and let it drop, and so did I. I reeled around, and there was Marthe leaning over the stone balustrade, shivering, sobbing, triumphant, holding in one hand the crystal tiara.

I CARRIED Ahrian into the house. Her body, light and frail as a bird's, was broken. It was a long fall into the garden, and she had hit hard. Her hair had come loose and hung over my arm in a long thick pall, dark purple in the moonlight.

I laid her on the couch, as gently as I could. She looked up at me and said quite clearly, "The beasts I could force against their will. The human mind is stronger. With all my skill and care—a little too strong."

She was still a while, and then she whispered, "I am sad, Rafe, that I must die so far away from home."

That was all.

The shot had roused the servants, who began to straggle in from the far wing of the house. I told them that David thought he had heard prowlers and fired at them, and in the excitement Ahrian had fallen from the terrace. They believed it. Why not? David was still sitting out there, doubled up on the cold stone, looking at nothing. Some-

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how I couldn't speak to him, or touch him. I sent the servants to get him in, and told them to call the people who had to be called. Then I took Marthe up to her room.

"It'll be all right," I told her. "It was an accident. Let me tell the story. You won't even be named."

"I don't care," she said, in a strange harsh voice. "All I care about is you, and you're alive and safe." She put her arms around me, a fierce and painful grip. "I'm sorry I killed her, I didn't mean to, but I'd do it again, Rafe, I'd do it again—she wanted to kill you!" She caught her breath, still clinging to me, and then she began to cry. "You fool, oh you fool, rushing David like that to make him fire at you instead of me." She said some more things, and then her voice got faint. I put her on the bed and made her take a sedative, and presently she was asleep.

I left the maid with her, and went downstairs. There were things I had to say to David.

That was how the McQuarrie tradition came to an end after two hundred years. Even the house is gone, for none of us could bear it any longer. David will never go to space again.

I'm glad. What did it gain the McQuarries? What has it ever gained men? Have men ever brought back more happiness from the stars? Will they ever?

Well, it's too late now to wonder about that. It's been too late, ever since the first skin-clad barbarian stared up at the moon and lusted for it. If Marthe and I have sons, I am afraid that McQuarries will go to space again.

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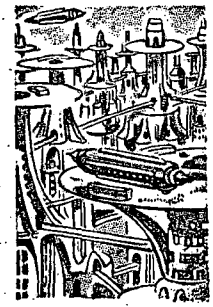

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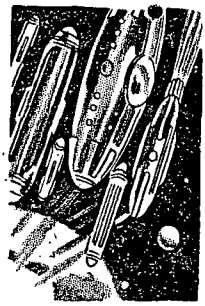

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Sloppy Joe sweaters, skirts and bobby sox were their uniforms—
Their equipment consisted of lipsticks and compacts—
They were deadlier than the H-Bomb!

WITCH WAR

by RICHARD MATHESON

SEVEN pretty little girls sitting in a row. Outside, night, pouring rain—war weather. Inside, toasty warm. Seven overalled little girls chatting. Plaque on the wall saying P.G. CENTER.

Sky clearing its throat with thunder, picking and dropping lint lightning from immeasurable shoulders. Rain hushing the world, bowing the trees, pocking earth. Square building, low, with one wall plastic.

Inside, the buzzing talk of seven pretty little girls.

"So I says to him—'Don't give me *that*, Mr. High and Mighty.' So he says, 'Oh yeah?' And I says, 'Yeah!' "

"Honest, will I ever be glad when this thing's over. I saw the cutest hat on my last furlough. Oh, *what* I wouldn't give to wear it!"

"You too? Don't I *know* it! You just can't get your hair right. Not in *this* weather. Why don't they let us get rid of it?"

"*Men*! They make me sick."

Seven gestures, seven postures, seven laughters ringing thin beneath thunder. Teeth showing in girl giggles. Hands tireless, painting pictures in the air.

P.G. Center. Girls. Seven of them. Pretty. Not one over sixteen. Curls. Pigtails. Bangs. Pouting little lips—smiling, frowning, shaping emotion on emotion. Sparkling young eyes—glittering, twinkling, narrowing, cold or warm.

Seven healthy young bodies restive on wooden chairs. Smooth adolescent limbs. Girls—pretty girls—seven of them.

AN ARMY of ugly shapeless men, stumbling in mud, struggling along the pitchblack muddy road.

Rain a torrent. Buckets of it thrown

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on each exhausted man. Sucking sound of great boots sinking into oozing yellow brown mud, pulling loose. Mud dripping from heels and soles.

Plodding men—hundreds of them—soaked, miserable, depleted. Young men bent over like old men. Jaws hanging loosely, mouths gasping at black wet air, tongues lolling, sunken eyes looking at nothing, betraying nothing.

Rest.

Men sink down in the mud, fall on their packs. Heads thrown back, mouths open, rain splashing on yellow teeth. Hands immobile—scrawny heaps of flesh and bone. Legs without motion—khaki lengths of worm-eaten wood. Hundreds of useless limbs fixed to hundreds of useless trunks.

In back, ahead, beside rumble trucks and tanks and tiny cars. Thick tires splattering mud. Fat treads sinking, tearing at mucky slime. Rain drumming wet fingers on metal and canvas.

Lightning flashbulbs without pictures. Momentary burst of light. The face of war seen for a second—made of rusty guns and turning wheels and faces staring.

Blackness. A night hand blotting out the brief storm glow. Wind-blown rain flitting over fields and roads, drenching trees and trucks. Rivulets of bubbly rain tearing scars from the earth. Thunder, lightning.

A whistle. Dead men resurrected. Boots in sucking mud again—deeper, closer, nearer. Approach to a city that bars the way to a city that bars the way to a . . .

An officer sat in the communication room of the P.G. Center. He peered at the operator, who sat hunched over the control board, phones over his ears, writing down a message.

The officer watched the operator. They are coming, he thought. Cold, wet and afraid they are marching at us. He shivered and shut his eyes.

He opened them quickly. Visions fill his darkened pupils—of curling smoke, flaming men, unimaginable horrors that shape themselves without words or pictures.

"Sir," said the operator, "From advance observation post. Enemy forces sighted."

The officer got up, walked over to the operator and took the message. He read it, face blank, mouth parenthesized. "Yes," he said.

He turned on his heel and went to the door. He opened it and went into the next room. The seven girls stopped talking. Silence breathed on the walls.

The officer stood with his back to the plastic window. "Enemies," he said, "Two miles away. Right in front of you."

He turned and pointed out the window. "Right out there. Two miles away. Any questions?"

A girl giggled.

"Any vehicles?" another asked.

"Yes. Five trucks, five small command cars, two tanks."

"That's too easy," laughed the girl, slender fingers fussing with her hair.

"That's all," said the officer. He started from the room. "Go to it," he added and, under his breath, "Monsters!"

He left.

"Oh, me," sighed one of the girls, "Here we go again."

"What a bore," said another. She opened her delicate mouth and plucked out chewing gum. She put it under her chair seat.

"At least it stopped raining," said a redhead, tying her shoelaces.

The seven girls looked around at each other. *Are you ready?* said their eyes. *I'm ready, I suppose.* They adjusted themselves on the chairs with girlish grunts and sigh. They hooked their feet around the legs of their chairs. All gum was placed in storage. Mouths were tightened into prudish fixity. The pretty little girls made ready for the game.

Finally they were silent on their chairs. One of them took a deep breath. So did another. They all tensed their milky flesh and clasped fragile fingers together. One quickly scratched her

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head to get it over with. Another sneezed prettily.

"Now," said a girl on the right end of the row.

Seven pairs of beady eyes shut. Seven innocent little minds began to picture, to visualize, to transport.

Lips rolled into thin gashes, faces drained of color, bodies shivered passionately. Their fingers twitching with concentration, seven pretty little girls fought a war.

THE men were coming over the rise of a hill when the attack came. The leading men, feet poised for the next step, burst into flame.

There was no time to scream. Their rifles slapped down into the muck, their eyes were lost in fire. They stumbled a few steps and fell, hissing and charred, into the soft mud.

Men yelled. The ranks broke. They began to throw up their weapons and fire at the night. More troops puffed incandescently, flared up, were dead.

"Spread out!" screamed an officer as his gesturing fingers sprouted flame and his face went up in licking yellow heat.

The men looked everywhere. Their dumb terrified eyes searched for an enemy. They fired into the fields and woods. They shot each other. They broke into flopping runs over the mud.

A truck was enveloped in fire. Its driver leaped out, a two-legged torch. The truck went bumping over the road, turned, wove crazily over the field, crashed into a tree, exploded and was eaten up in blazing light. Black shadows flitted in and out of the aura of light around the flames. Screams rent the night.

Man after man burst into flame, fell crashing on his face in the mud. Spots of searing light lashed the wet darkness—screams—running coals, sputtering, glowing, dying—incendiary ranks—trucks cremated—tanks blowing up.

A little blonde, her body tense with repressed excitement. Her lips twitch, a giggle hovers in her throat. Her nostrils dilate. She shudders in giddy fright. She imagines, imagines . . .

A soldier runs headlong across a field, screaming, his eyes insane with horror. A gigantic boulder rushes at him from the black sky.

His body is driven into the earth, mangled. From the rock edge his fingertips protrude.

The boulder lifts from the ground, crashes down again, a shapeless trip hammer. A flaming truck is flattened. The boulder flies again to the black sky.

A pretty brunette, her face a feverish mask. Wild thoughts tumble through her virginal brain. Her scalp grows taut with ecstatic fear. Her lips draw back from clenching teeth. A gasp of terror hisses from her lips. She imagines, imagines . . .

A soldier falls to his knees. His head jerks back. In the light of burning comrades, he stares dumbly at the white-foamed wave that towers over him.

It crashes down, sweeps his body over the muddy earth, fills his lungs with salt water. The tidal wave roars over the field, drowns a hundred flaming men, tosses their corpses in the air with thundering whitecaps.

Suddenly the water stops, flies into a million pieces and disintegrates.

A lovely little redhead, hands drawn under her chin in tight bloodless fists. Her lips tremble, a throb of delight expands her chest. Her white throat contracts, she gulps in a breath of air. Her nose wrinkles with dreadful joy. She imagines, imagines . . .

A running soldier collides with a lion. He cannot see in the darkness. His hands strike wildly at the shaggy mane. He clubs with his rifle butt.

A scream. His face is torn off with one blow of thick claws. A jungle roar billows in the night.

A red-eyed elephant tramples wildly through the mud, picking up men in its thick trunk, hurling them through the air, mashing them under driving black columns.

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Wolves bound from the darkness, spring, tear at throats. Gorillas scream and bounce in the mud, leap at falling soldiers.

A rhinoceros, leather skin glowing in the light of living torches, crashes into a burning tank, wheels, thunders into blackness, is gone.

Fangs—claws—ripping teeth—shrieks—trumpeting—roars. The sky rains snakes.

SILENCE. Vast brooding silence. Not a breeze, not a drip of rain, not a grumble of distant thunder. The battle is ended.

Grey morning mist rolls over the burned, the torn, the drowned, the crushed, the poisoned, the sprawling dead.

Motionless trucks—silent tanks, wisps of oily smoke still rising from their shattered hulks. Great death covering the field. Another battle in another war.

Victory—everyone is dead.

The girls stretched languidly. They extended their arms and rotated their round shoulders. Pink lips grew wide in pretty little yawns. They looked at each other and tittered in embarrassment. Some of them blushed. A few looked guilty.

Then they all laughed out loud. They opened more gumpacks, drew compacts from pockets, spoke intimately with schoolgirl whispers, with late-night dormitory whispers.

Muted giggles rose up fluttering in the warm room.

"Aren't we awful?" one of them said, powdering her pert nose.

Later they all went downstairs and had breakfast.

STUDENTS—BONE UP ON OXYGEN!

SHOULD anyone ever try to settle down in a penthouse atop Mt. Everest it seems probable that he would soon lose all memory of how to find the way down from his lofty perch. For, according to experiments conducted by Dr. William P. Hurder of Louisiana State University, lack of oxygen results in a definite slowdown if not a breakdown of the mental processes, especially those connected with the abilities to learn and relearn.

After six hours in an atmosphere equivalent in oxygen to that 30,000 feet up, the average individual human would be practically a total loss in both departments. And Mt. Everest is just under 30,000 feet above sea level according to the most recent measurements.

The experiments, conducted on rats, guinea pigs and other laboratory animals, revealed a wide variation in the effects of oxygen-lack upon individual systems. Some went out of whack when exposed for as little as half an hour. But by six hours even the most resistent took the count.

Aviators have long boosted the mental-process quickening brought about by a few whiffs from an oxygen tank. And since it is now proven that lack of oxygen does effect learning processes, perhaps they have something. Some enterprising merchant in a college town should try stocking up an oxygen bar around exam time. It might result in an unprecedented wave of Phi Beta Kappa Keys.

—MATT LEE

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 6)

Radio in 1950 saw its first science fiction outside of occasional science fantasy stories networked on more general dramatic programs—remember the Orson Welles broadcast back in 1938? Of the half dozen or so programs attempted along exclusively stf lines only two—DIMENSION X and 2,000 PLUS—endured long enough to rate comment.

DIMENSION X, by far the better of these, did fairly well as a sustaining show, picked up a sponsor who commercialized it to failure, staggered along briefly without backing and was finally suspended by its producing network.

It seemed to us to be an honest and generally ambitious program that might well have earned a happier fate.

Yet it was far from a perfect show—save in a few broadcasts when a powerful story won listener emotions, notably in the instances of some Bradbury tales and Jack Vance's THE POTTERS OF FIRSK. The sound-effects folk took the show to their collective bosom and indulged in so many and such loud noises that usually the plot itself and its people came off a poor second. In some cases, we fear, this was no more than common mercy to the listener—but such howling winds, such sepulchral voice tones (via echo-filters), such metallic clankings of robots, such rocket blasts scarcely constitute dramatic entertainment.

The other program—2,000 PLUS—is still around, complete with all the above noises, but it is promulgated in general on a sort of patchwork comic-strip level that is not going to win stf many of the adult devotees it now needs. We no longer listen to it at all.

In television we find CAPTAIN VIDEO running rampant over a couple of pale carbon copies—all strictly cut to the FLASH GORDON school of science fiction. Of these we can only say—spare us!

An Unpromising Invasion

So, to date, the science fiction invasion of what is still colloquially called the ether has been far from promising. Outside of the over-reliance on sound effects—and perhaps a cause of this reliance—has been a tendency to select scripts for ideas and gadgetry neatness rather than for soundly developed conflict of character and situation. The cake has been made secondary to the frosting and an inevitable large bellyache is the result.

Yet radio at any rate *can* do it—as witness the excellent broadcast of Bradbury's AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT, one of the finest science fantasies ever written. We only wish radio would do it more often.

In book publishing the story is much the same. Outside of the few thousands of rabid collectors and devotees (bless 'em!) who purchase everything in hard or soft covers even remotely connected with stf, science fiction does not, unlike the detective story, sell *because* it is science fiction. It sells when its theme and development, properly exploited, appeal to a lot of non-fan readers. As witness the success of THE BIG EYE—certainly an stf chestnut but one whose emotional approach drew purchasers like the proverbial flies.

Some three or four years ago we said in this column that what science fiction needed was some electric character like Sherlock Holmes to get the general public interested. We still think it would help, although certainly no such magnetic personality has yet appeared in print.

Humanity vs. Gadgetry

However, the basic need, if stf *is* to become general soon, runs a lot deeper. Frankly we suspect that what it needs is a greater emphasis upon humanity and less upon gadgets. After all, it is being written for humans to read. To date too much of it is wholly intellectual in appeal—and there simply are not as yet enough folk around sufficiently educated to understand or enjoy it.

To some extent, if such a parallel is permissible, science fiction is in the unhappy situation of so-called "modern" music two or three decades ago. Composers, conductors and musicians *knew* it was alive and good. But because its rhythmic and tonal patterns were so utterly different from those to which the ears, not only of the public but of most critics were attuned, it was rejected as "noise" or "junk" by both.

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Today the dissonances of—say—Prokofief, Stravinsky and Ravel—have become familiar and their musical values are evident to all. But originally, because of their unfamiliarity, they required thought for understanding, and the great bulk of music lovers, who listen only with their ears, were outraged. They needed the time to acquire understanding by a sort of osmosis.

The same on a lower musical scale was true of jazz. And the same, we fear, is true of science fiction today. If its wider acceptance is to be speeded up, some more fundamentally human approach must be developed.

OUR letter column, after an early survey, looks to us to be filled with cayenne and buckshot—a goodly proportion of same directed our way. So let us at it before we are thoroughly perforated and/or sneeze ourself to death.

The first epistle emerges from the flower-scented fogs of Vancouver, British Columbia, and we are entitling it—

CATERING
by Alfred W. Purdy

Dear Editor: A point which some of your readers make in the letter section is that they think more stf should be written for the emotionally and mentally mature, less for adolescents. If anyone asked me, I might say that I am mentally and emotionally mature, and yet, when I think it over more thoroughly, I wonder. If the human race was mature might there not be less war and more delving for scientific truth, even if the truth did not correspond to religious and patriotic concepts. The human race is not mature to my way of thinking, not in any respect, even self-appraisal. However, it is moving in the right direction.

The above leads me back to stf because it is understandable that science fiction must cater to all types of reader. Therefore, some people like Captain Future (the morons), others like Ray Bradbury (the intellectuals). Probably I am a nihilist because I like neither. Inevitably the reader of a story identifies himself with the hero. I find it difficult to do so with Bradbury's heroes and I avoid C. Future as if he had some particularly malignant variety of space disease.

To sum it up, I applaud your policy of variety in subject and form but I do not necessarily subscribe to the individual example. If your magazine specialized in one particular type of story it would close the gates for something entirely new and exciting. The oft-wished-for Sherlock Holmes type of hero in stf may eventually come along and quite conceivably his debut will be in SS or TWS.

Another point brought up by Bill Morse in the letter section is that heroes in stf seem to be uniformly good or bad and human nature just doesn't work that way. Ten years ago I read a story called "The Left Handed Passenger" by Felix Reisenberg, in which the hero was a murderer who married and then did away with his wives for their money. Nevertheless, come the last page, the murderer got the girl. The reader was even left a little uncertain as to whether the hero meant to discontinue his wife-killing proclivities. The same thing applies to stf but reader Morse expressed the idea much better than I can.

I might mention that I am one of the older followers of stf, since I first picked up a mag in 1936—the old WONDER STORIES, which I believe was your predecessor. I was only fifteen at the time, but a story by William Skidmore concerning two men who managed to shrink themselves to microscopic size in order to go inside a man's body and prepare it for an operation to remove a bullet made a deep impression on me. Perhaps you've read the story yourself.

Among the early issues of SS Kuttner's "A Million Years to Conquer" was very good and I sometimes wonder how it would stand up beside some modern stories. However, of all the novels I liked Charles Harness' "Flight Into Yesterday" and "Wine of the Dreamers" next. Incidentally MacDonald is the best writer in stf today despite his prolific output. I sometimes wonder if he has time to look at the magazines in which his stories appear.

I write stf myself and freely admit I am not a very good writer but I expect to improve. Bill Morse's suggestion about uniform goodness and ditto evil made a deep impression which I will remember. A year ago I wrote about a dozen stories and sent them to one of your competitors which I considered as the worst in the genre. I got them back of course. They were the first fiction I had ever written, though I have published poetry for years.

After the unfortunate dozen I wrote a short story about baseball which I sent to Thrilling Publications. I got it back but they told me what they thought was wrong. A year later I feel much more confident and intend to assault your portals shortly with a small barrage. The above is the only ulterior motive I have in writing you at the present time. I have some hope that when you see a story of mine you may look at the name of the author and say to yourself, I've seen that guy Purdy before—maybe it was in the old Argosy. And forthwith you will acept the story and write me a huge check (I can dream can't I?).

I believe your magazines are the best in the field but they are still far from "mature." I don't think there is much point in naming a long list of novels which I consider superior but I would like to see a large percentage of them in book form, especially "Flight Into Yesterday."—*1846 West 2nd Ave., Vancouver, B. C.*

Well, Mr. Purdy, your thoughts of science fiction—excepting those anent the work of

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Ray Bradbury, of course—seem to run a close parallel to our own as expressed in the editorial preceding your letter. Yes, maturity is perhaps the rarest condition attained by any humans and we lay no claim to having even approached it ourself.

However, we do not like our heroes pure gold nor our villains solid ebony. Unfortunately most of our writers seem to be even less educated to the fascinating and endless possibilities that lie between those extremes, just awaiting development, than what you term the "human" race.

Perhaps you will be able to help us out with your own stories. We sincerely hope so.

CAPERING
by Bill Morse

Sir: Though you failed to print my spirited defense of the robot (I admit it deserved the waste-basket), I hereby tender my armor-plated olive branch under the influence of "Jersey Joe" Gibson's plea. Leave us, indeed avoid battlegrounds.

BUT (here we go again) Nancy Brown raises a point that is normally skipped—whom do we send on our space-missions (assuming Earth holds its seams together for that long)? Bradbury has done his best to put that question—and a tentative answer or two—before the public but it still seems largely to be ignored.

So we get a crew of Charles Atlas graduates to pull the switches in the first space-ships. Do it follow that they are our best representatives for a visit to an alien planet? It does not (see THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES). So we add a batch of scientists to take charge after the landing. What happens if the alien population is hostile? The crewmen take over and make the aforementioned population still more hostile to subsequent visitors.

So who goes? Let Jersey Joe, Indiana, Ollie, Mac and myself have the chance! You too maybe? Unfortunately, prejudiced as I am, I doubt if that is the answer. I am not giving a lecture but asking for information and suggestions. And until anybody has any better ideas than Bradbury's theory that only the quiet hard-working citizen is like to find mental kinship with non-terrestrials, we are unlikely to get any further with the discussion.

If Jersey Joe's invitation to five-card draw is literal as well as figurative, I accept. See you in New Orleans this year, I hope, Joe. And *please*, DEAR Editor, keep up the revised covers. Bergey must have been given a free hand at last. If that cover girl was drawn from life may I have her phone number? And my thanks to Brackett and Hamilton for a swell March issue.—*W.E.E. (RAF Signals) R.C.A.F., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.*

Better ask Bergey about that phone number, Bill. Nice job, wasn't it? As for the space-trip bid, count us in to anywhere but the Moon. That pitted satellite has little appeal for us. And let's not take along a Buffalo Bill to shoot us alien steaks for supper. Which brings our Canadian capers to a close for the nonce.

PRACTICALLY NON-EXISTENT
by Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.

Dear Editor: Although my time of late has been such that letters to the editor have become practically non-existent with me, the March issue of SS overwhelmingly makes necessary, or at least deserves a letter to you.

It was with more than the usual amount of enjoyment that I read this issue, particularly so because it actually had something that I had hardly expected to see—a cover by Earle Bergey which I actually can call a real piece of *art*. It is said that an artist, a real artist, who works long and produces much, is bound to turn out much of what one classifies as the usual hash, much more so than any products which are real art.

The cover on the March STARTLING I classify as real art, and I would like to take this letter to congratulate Mr. Bergey on the wonderful job he did this time.

The lead novel, which no doubt inspired Mr. Bergey to produce his masterpiece, was a masterpiece in itself, although it lacked in the writing the real touch which moves one to greater than the usual limits of ecstatic enjoyment, it was none the less a real and very enjoyable novel, and Mrs. Brackett is to be congratulated on the fine job she did.—*P.O. Box 696, Kings Park, Long Island, New York.*

Thanks, Franklin, thanks very much. But you'd better keep a tight rein on your ecstasy or someone will be cutting you to ribbons as they did the motion picture of the same name (Ecstasy, with Hedy Lamarr).

STAR CITY STAR
by Mrs. Laura E. John

Dear Editor: Congratulations! STARMEN OF LLYRDIS wonderful!—*Star City, Indiana.*

GLADDEST CREATURE
by M. McNeil

Dear Editor: I'm the gladdest creature in the universe! I've managed to persuade the newsdealer to get Startlings! At last I can once again enjoy your terrific mag!

The cover is wonderful! Super! At first I thought Finlay had done it, which speaks well for Bergey. It would have been good even for Finlay! What a distance Bergey has gone since I first met him when he did an awful blurb on the cover of Spring '45 TWS. Starmen of Llyrdis was super. It is the best I've seen in your mag since Prisoner of Mars. Except for the Cap Future story, which kept up the high traditions of its predecessors, the

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rest were only fair. Remember to give Brackett 1000 jugs of Xeno for me. WHY DID YOU LET THE FUDDY DUDDIES THAT STOLE SARGE SATURN GET OUR-HoF?—*2146 Stanmore, Houston, Texas.*

The SS HALL OF FAME was not stolen, Herr McNeil—it simply burst out of its britches and became two other magazines—namely FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE and WONDER STORY ANNUAL. Suggest you purchase same. Otherwise we think you're lovely too.

WOT—NO GRAVITY?
by Marian Cox

Dear Ed: Apparently Bergey never heard of the law of gravity. I refer, of course, to the March cover of SS. If that gal leans over or even takes a deep breath, oh brother! My uncle's reaction when he saw it—"It's startling, all right." Someday, gravity will triumph over modesty, and then where will the poor girl be? Probably in jail. Holy Suffering Catfish! My family disapproves of science fiction enough as it is. Must you prejudice them more? It's getting to the place where I have to sneak my mags in.

Why, oh, why do you poor misguided males seem to think that any female fan, or even any intelligent girl, has to be first cousin to Lena the Hyena? Won't your male vanity let you admit that a girl can have brains and beauty too?

Now, on to more pleasant subjects. "Then Fly Our Greetings" and "Men of the Ten Books" were very good. Also liked "The Two Shadows." The letter section was good, but how about more of it? And, please, no more comments on differences in skin color. A fan is a fan, period! Would like more poetry, though.—*51 Cedar Lane, Hilton Village, Virginia.*

And we thought alarm over the strapless evening gown had long since been superseded over seismic tremors caused by the plunging neckline! We could tell you a dozen methods by which the cover girl's gown in question could have defied Sir Isaac's first law—fortunately or otherwise virtually none of them printable. Ingenuity—that's our middle name in such matters.

In Paris, during the Directory, high fashion left the female bosom completely uncovered in the Classic Greek tradition. Tsk, tsk!

OH-OH!
by Rubin Gotesky

Dear Editor: In the March issue of *Startling Stories,* in a column called "The Ether Vibrates" which I presume to be the product of your labor, you go to great trouble to "tee off" against those so ignorant as to attribute the phrase "Survival of the Fittest" to Darwin, a man of science who presumably knew better than to use it. Indignantly and vehemently, you place the onus for this dreadful expression upon Herbert Spencer.

Unfortunately, the truth is Darwin is the inventor of the phrase and Herbert Spencer, merely a borrower.

If you had ever taken the trouble to read *The Origin of the Species,* which is easily obtainable in a Giant Modern Library edition, you would have found the phrase in a heading on page 70 which runs as follows:

"Illustrations of the Action of Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest."

I suggest you verify this.—*Department of Philosophy, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.*

Technically you have us, Rubin. But, Rubin, Rubin, we were thinking in terms of theory, not mere phraseology. And surely, as a student and/or instructor of philosophy, you must admit that we were right. We doubt that Darwin intended even the phrase to carry the odoriferous implication the corrupt Spencer gave it. But thanks for checking us up on it.

WHEN YOU SAY THAT, SMILODON!
by Les & Es Cole

Dear Snark: And now this! We are suffering from severe frustration brought on by "The Young Lions," "Ordeal By Slander," insufficient time to read those New Yorkers some wonderful people sent us for Christmas and inability to get hands containing more than 8 points after carefully memorizing Goren's "Standard Book Of Bidding" and "Standard Book Of Play" among other things. And then we had to wade through your editorial!

Holy Smoke! Why did you do it, kiddo? Weren't you the guy that once flunked paleo? Listen, don't ever ever write something like that again without submitting it to us for proof-reading first. To be perfectly frank, your conclusions are "correct"—because they agree with what we think—but your method! Did you consult even the most elementary reference during the writing?

Now, we are pleased to consider ourselves friends of yours. (Though sometimes we wonder!) Therefore, we won't really tear you to pieces as any well-grounded paleontologist could. We shall merely content ourselves with ripping you apart.

Regardless of who is responsible for the phrase "survival of the fittest," the phrase is valid because today it means, "those life-forms best suited to their environment are most capable of surviving in that environment." Our stumbling block is—as it always seems to be—a semantic one. "Survival of the fittest" is a meaningles phrase unless examined in an ecological light.

Your statement "that survival seems more likely to go to those species that practised cooperation than those who make competition the keynote of their culture" doesn't make sense to us. All species practise cooperation with man's probably the highest form yet evolved. Then too, the only types we can think of off-hand that practise intra-specific warfare (certainly at best a negative form of cooperation) are Homo saps, certain species of Rattus and Mus, and certain genera (?) in the orders

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Isoptera and Hymenoptera. And speaking of the social insects, take a good look at 'em: they've been cooperating for a good long time, possibly as much as 175 million years. And sure, they've survived, but are they any "good"? (Good being here defined in terms of Homo sapiens ecology.) We have a hunch that what you meant was more and better forms of cooperation.

We couldn't quite figure out what you meant by bringing old Smilodon into the picture, but we did note that practically everything you said about him was "wrong." Granted the saber-tooth was large, but efficient? Efficient *when*, then or now? In connection with this you say, "a species whose powers of adjustment and survival are provable in living room and alley as well as in the jungle." OK, prove it for us!

Rather than allow our sophistry to win the argument for you, we shall make some more positive statements on the subject. Firstly, Smilodon killed in a different fashion from his relatives of today. Those teeth had a purpose; namely, to cut and slash downward. The power came from the upper jaw, not the lower as in today's forms. Efficient? Sure, for the Pleistocene, but where would he find an animal today that would hold still long enough?

Moreover, from the critter's very anatomy, he must have been relatively slower-moving than the cats of the Recent, and Romer—a man who should know—thinks that pussy became extinct because his food supply died off, and he *couldn't adjust* to the change. While the senior author's knowledge of paleopathology is restricted to a few articles sandwiched between assignments on arkosic sands in the Jour. Geol., he believes that there is some basis for the idea that Smilodon's extinction may have been aided by—rotten teeth!

And incidentally, be careful how you throw those "millions of years" around. Geologic time is long but let's not go overboard. There's damn little to support the contention that Pleistocene—the epoch during which the saber-tooth lived—began more than 600,000 years ago.

Skipping the fol-de-rol about the dodo—except to point out that that beastie survived within his environment until natural enemies wiped him out and that has nothing to do with cooperation or the lack thereof—we'd like to take up this question of dogs (not to be confused with beetles!) you seem to have raised.

You can't say that the pekinese and chihuahua—hereinafter referred to as dog or dogs—are cooperating. They're bred that way! The dog is completely dependent upon man, and in the majority of cases the relationship is parasitic. All Canus familiaris vars. sprang from either the wolf or the dingo, and neither of the latter forms "cooperate" with man. The point is: is cooperation really "cooperation" when given under duress as in the case of the dog?

One other point concerning the wolf (And when you say about the wolf "a far better equipped canine species," we'd like to ask what you mean by far better equipped.) is his shrinking ecological area. You say he has been driven to the Northland wastes by his refusal to cooperate; we say he has been driven there by the presence of man and what he has done to the land and by a changing climate. Might as well say that the elephant has been driven to Africa by his refusal to cooperate.

You seem to have slipped into the old generality that science for science's sake is "good." You imply that professors, doctors and their ilk leave behind more value than the competitor in private industry. Without your qualifying that further, we shall have to reply, "Nertz!" And we don't know how many doctors and professors you know but among those we know well enough to have told us, the competition is terrific and the pettiness so small as to be terrifyingly large.

Had enough?—*3040½ Adeline St., Berkeley 3, California.*

Yes, plenty. But two asides to all and sundry. One—we definitely did not flunk paleontology. Our grief was structural geology and that only because we got chickenpox and could not take our exam. Nobody—but *nobody*—ever did any daily work in that one back in 1928-29 except maybe a lad or two who had his mind set on mucking around in oilfields. And so old Smily went out because he failed to adjust to his dentist! Well, we're not sure he didn't take the correct path at that.

L'ALLERGE
by Joe Gibson

Dear Sam: You're certainly a fool for punishment. Not only do you print my cryptic epistle in TEV, you even ask me to explain it. Okay, it's your nickel—or dime, rather. TEV did become a bit battlegroundish for a while there. And I said I have an allergy to battlegrounds, which probably explains the letter.

Can't agree with the Coles that such controversies are valueless, tho. I think it's good to bring 'em up occasionaly. Not often, mind you; just occasionally. The Coles said "discussions are unproductive because the Gibsons can only nod agreement while the Siglers you couldn't touch. . . ." But us Gibsons and the Untouchables form, happily, only small segments of the public. Most people simply are not concerned. It doesn't affect them personally. Which is why such prejudices as we discussed are accepted so blandly, without question, by society.

I think this hurts the people being ostracized far more than do the people who're deliberately active against 'em. The public doesn't realize it. They don't see it. So an occasional controversy can sometimes be illuminating, raising doubts against these prejudices, making them slightly less acceptable. And the people being ostracized have a slightly better chance to put up their side of the argument. Our society improves in the long run too. But it wouldn't pay to bring up these matters too often.

Let's nail the lid shut on that one and get on to another. Sam, I just can't go along with your editorial. There are colloquial differences of interpretation. "Survival of the fittest" leaves a lot of room for differences. East of the Mississippi it has an interpretation which, I'm afraid, Soviet propaganda can and does use to advantage. In the West, it has another interpretation. So when you

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say, "It does not take any vast intellectual insight to discover that the thought behind 'survival of the fittest' has virtually no relation to fact," I believe, it depends on which thought you're talking about.

East, the "fittest" means saber-tooth tigers. West, we know a little more about that. Then you say, "In fact at times these factors (in nature) seem to delight in eliminating the strong and allowing the weak to live on." Depends on what you consider "strong" and "weak," chum. And later, "Fortunately not all of our basic urges seem to be competitive and therefore destructive." Seems there are differing interpretations of "competitive," too. In metropolitan areas, it seems that unless you're a millionaire, you're nobody. In the wilderness. . . .

Nature has her own ideas about what's "weak" and "strong." And who's the "fittest" to survive. It doesn't quite coincide with your notions, Sam. In fact, it doesn't coincide with a lot of peoples' notions.

The best way to learn about nature isn't in a biology or paleontology class, Sam. The best way is to live in the wilderness. One of the things you learn about nature is that she can display just about all the judgment mankind needs to understand himself. So when you started off with "Further proof of the greater inherent strength of those who give rather than those who take—apart from the cataclysms of war and nature—" I couldn't follow along with it.

You've got to take as well as give and know when to do each. Let's consider some "cataclysms of nature." You mention the saber-tooth tiger as the "largest and most efficient of all cats." All right, the North American counterpart of that, today, would probably be the grizzly bear. Strong? Physically, yes. But believe me, a grizzly bear will step very obligingly off a game trail any time a skunk wants to pass him! Strong? Weak? Take your choice.

You mentioned competition. There was the New York businessman who liked hunting in the North Woods. He had a summer cabin up there, to which he would fly from wordly cares come the spring thaws. But there were bears in them woods! And every winter, when he was away, those bears would break into his cabin and smash everything. Each summer, he had to spend half the season rebuilding it. He tried traps, heavy timbers, everything. The bears still smashed his cabin up.

Competition, you think? Well, he asked an old-time trapper what to do. The trapper looked over his cabin, asked if he locked everything up tight when he left. Yes, he did. Well, bears come out of their holes in early spring, and they're hungry. They could smell the food-scents about the cabin, which was why they broke in. How to prevent it? The trapper swung the door open and staked it down so it would stay open all winter.

The bears came to the cabin, smelled the food-scents, and walked in. They looked around, saw that the cabin was empty, and walked out. Nothing was smashed. Previously, when they'd had to break in, finding the cabin empty had so angered them that they broke everything in sight.

So there it is. When you say, Sam, that "To be personally aggressive a man must live in a world enclosed by the radius of his own wants, ambitions and personality," you aren't just talking about men. You're talking about those bears too—and every other creature of nature. But the "fittest" who survive are those who understand that quality in others and respect their right to it.

And now, we're talking about justice. Some creatures—and some men—do not respect the right of others to be just as aggressive as they are. They must have power over the others. They must rule.

And now, also, people are talking about "peace." The UNO was founded "to preserve peace." Nothing's said, in most cases, about justice. Justice demands understanding—something you can't pass off on a few harried statesmen and demand they give it to you. And understanding, once a man has it, can make his own wants, ambitions and personality something to see. When Kipling wrote "when two strong men meet face to face," he wasn't talking about saber-tooth tigers. He meant two men who understood and respected each other. Gunga Din was no maharajah.

It isn't a matter of "giving" or "taking" that marks understanding—but of doing both. Whether the hard-driving individuals of the business world "give" or "take" is debatable. The competitive business of trading has built many a civilization, including ours. Perhaps a tycoon wears himself out trying to get more and more power for himself; perhaps the fault is that, while capitalism has shifted from monopolistic to managerial corporations, the weight and responsibility has not been shifted from the Board Director's shoulders as it should be. Capitalism's still changing, y'know.

But people do not learn to "give" and "take" with any real perspective. For example, there's the axiom that "people do not like change." Actually, most of us do like changes now and then. What was good enough for grandfather gets a little boresome at times. Then why all the furor? Simply because what really gets us mad is when it's someone else making the changes. So long as we make 'em, they're fine—we can't understand why other people object to 'em! There it is—lack of understanding for others. Lack of respect. Lack of justice. And lack of peace and equality.

It's doubtful if there will ever be equality without justice. All men are created equal but God help 'em after creation because there are not equal opportunities. In fact, what proves to be a good opportunity for one man may prove to be a dismal failure for another—as individuals, we differ in aptitudes, in talents. To develop anything near equal opportunity for everyone, we'll have to learn one hell of a lot more about mankind. As long as one man scorns another, very little will be learned. There must be justice. The killers must not be allowed to rule. Unfortunately, we preach "thou shalt not kill" but, as yet, we still haven't developed a means of treating convicted killers other than executing them. This makes justice a grim business. People don't like to talk about it. It demands aggressiveness where forgiveness doesn't work—forgiven killers often keep on killing.

Engineers are an aggressive bunch. They're the ones who made nothing impossible. They compete against each other, trying to outdo each other with the best work, thinking up the best improvements, ironing out the worst bugs. Quite casually, they cuss hell out of each other. And yet, because they respect each other, they can work together as teams, pooling their talents, to put every piece of

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our technological civilization together with hundred-thousandths of an inch exactness. The prime requisite of a good engineer isn't high math aptitude or mechanical genius—it's that he be able to get along well with the rest of the gang.

The greatest weapon ever devised for man's use was the human mind. Seems to me we need to respect that weapon. All of which reminds me of a bit of poetry; Sam, see if you recognize it—

Be not afraid of any man,
No matter what his size;
If danger threatens, call on me
And I will equalize.

—*24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.*

Are you sure, when you use the words "West" and "we" in a single clause, Joe, you don't mean the Hudson rather than the Mississippi? As for your jungle, a pox upon it. No civilized man—no truly civilized man, that is, wants any part of it per se. He may be driven to it by the exigencies of catastrophe, war or his career—but never by choice.

The whole material purpose of civilization is to banish the discomforts of the wilderness for the proper civilized human environment of clipped lawn and smooth sidewalk. As for the bears—they don't even make particularly good steak. Surely the urge to endure discomfort without need in the name of pleasure is pathological, to put it mildly.

BEWARE THE ALBINO!
by Hattie Chesney

Dear Sir: I have seen this "race" sore festering before on the pages of readers' columns and, if I remember rightly, a lot of noble and heartfelt sentiments were spouted and everyone, (except a few old germs like Mr. Sigler) seemed to agree that it should be cured but I don't remember that anything was ever done about it.

As a female who hates dithering and demands action I now expect to see, in a coming issue, a story which will end all this cud-chewing for all times—a story in which the hero is as black as basalt (and twice as hard and slick) and in which the villain is a sinister lily-livered Albino. You may think that I am kidding but I am not. The integrity of your magazine rests on whether or not you publish such a story. If I do not find it in the next few issues, I swear by Welles (H. G. and Orson both) that I will commit the cardinal sin—I will spend my quarter on a rival magazine.

And don't give me any malarkey about not getting such a story—just whistle at that stable of well groomed writers and command one to hang upside down by his tail and type the tale.

Looking back, I can remember numerous stories in which the *heroines* were various hues and colors. In particular I remember a blue one who produced a patchwork child when mated to one of our red-blooded American heroes. Recently, in a full length STF novel, I encountered a green heroine whom the hero, a bloomin' bloody Englishman, seemed to find quite desirable. Trying to look upon this situation dispassionately I can still come to only one conclusion—that women are attractive to men, no matter what they look like—but not vice versa. Can this be true?—*599 Thurman Avenue, Columbus 6, Ohio.*

Why women are attracted to men—disregarding the obvious biological urges, et cetera, has always been somewhat of a mystery to us, Hattie. As for the story you want, take a skim through the lead in the September SS. The black man in question is not the hero but he comes closer than anyone else. Alack, no albinoes, however.

SINCERELY—WE HOPE
by Gerry de la Ree

Dear Sam: The March issue of STARTLING was a pleasant surprise to me. At first glance it looked like just another issue—a return to a sexy cover after January's noble astronomical effort. However, on looking more closely at Mr. Bergey's work I found it quite good. "In fact," I said to myself, "the gal looks almost human."

After reading Leigh Brackett's fine novel, "The Starmen of Llyrdis", I came to the conclusion that our worthy Mr. Bergey must have actually skimmed over at least part of the yarn himself—for a change. He seems to have done a remarkable job of painting Miss Brackett's heroine, Shairn, or "Shairne" as it appeared several times in the story. So, hats off to Mr. Bergey.

And some kind words to Miss Brackett, or should I say Mrs. Hamilton? She puts her husband to shame. Edmond has long since stopped turning out stuff as good as this. Hamilton's yarns are never what I'd call really bad. He's got to a point—as have Kuttner and some others—where almost anything he writes is worth reading but not exactly world-shattering.

Miss Brackett's novel was among the better ones you've published in the past few years. At least, for a change, the hero wasn't the usual mechanical genius. Let's see some more longer efforts by Leigh in the coming year.

Glad to hear Hamilton's going to drop Cap Future again. Should never have revived him.

Speaking of letters, your Ether Vibrates column has certainly improved over what it was a couple years back. Letters are not only more mature, but are definitely more interesting.

Book and fanzine reviews also on okay side. Keep them up.

Interior illustrations have slipped since Finlay left you.—*277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, New Jersey.*

Finlay is back at work for us, praise Allah, after a lengthy period of absence. And since Stevens during much of that same period was down with a serious illness the reason for the slip becomes apparent. You're a bit hard on Hamilton and HK but we have sneaking hopes they may fool you pleasantly in the not-so-distant future. For the rest—thanks.

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SALAAM!
by Anita Smith

Dear Sir: Now I know why so many new writers to editors go coy. The thought of addressing the man who writes those admirable editorials (yes, take a bow) and possibly even his varied and critical readership is almost as tongue-tying as a first attempt at public-speaking.

You won't get any controversy-stirring cogency from me, though. I don't read what I don't like, so I can't invite any of the kicks in the pants (that's not mine) that leaven the letter pages. Sometime I may give you a list of the stories I've *read* in your magazine, if you need my vote on styles and themes.

Any other time I would have said, "I'm glad to miss the Hall of Fame." But I've just finished doing a few somersaults in time—reading a 1949 reprint of a 1938 story *(The Loot of Time* by Clifford D. Simak) that leaves a lucky old Neanderthaler sitting in a ruined time machine remembering his friends from 1940 and the Fifty-Sixth century and their Centaurian enemies, circa Fifty-First century. I liked the story, the writing, and the characters, especially One-Eye. I think for coherence and enjoyability it beat Simak's 1950 long novel, *The Time Quarry*, six ways for Sunday.

Since Lafayette René Hubbard has vaulted to world fame I've heard many references to the mediocrity of his erstwhile science fiction. I must register an emphatic dissent, based for the present on his 1949 Series on the Conquest of Space. Except for the formula space-pioneers-far-from-the-giants-of-legend, I call them great stories for any type mag. And that formula's all right except for its reiteration. Later I'll "come to present time" and aim at your current issue—*3258 West 141st Street, Cleveland 11, Ohio.*

Come on up, Mrs. Smith, we're awaiting. You certainly buttered us up to a fare-thee-well. Much of Hubbard's stf work in this and other magazines is excellent—very little of it poor. His dianetics kick and its success is an invitation to brickbats from those horrible little people who are always around in too great numbers. We've already told you in a previous answer in this column where to find the Hofers—in FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE and WONDER STORY ANNUAL, in case you have turned to your own letter first however.

PLASTERED
by Ellen Kahn

Dear Mr. Merwin: Though my name has never appeared in these pages I positively refuse to start this letter with the opening gambit which is so overworked—poor thing, it needs a vacation! Instead, I shall merely say that to me SS is a new discovery and I like it. Good stories, interesting letter column and I like those editorials, too.

March issue is satisfactory. My favorite story is "Then Fly Our Greetings," which I like for that significant passage on pages 104 and 105. At this point is described the phase of the change in which the people are so closely attracted to one another that they "were clustered together like bats in a cavern" and Kyle "plastered himself wildly against the quivering mass"—they "ached to get closer to each other, to be interpenetrated with each other's beings." And apparently they succeeded in fusing their minds into the ultimate unity and joy. Since I am interested very much in telepathy and emotional transmission this passage is a memorable one to me. I would like to hear from others who are interested in these things and also in the Future.

Next place I give to "Men of the Ten Books" because it presents an interesting facet of human nature plus a surprise ending. Third place to "The Two Shadows" for its paradox. Fourth to "Starmen of Llyrdis", fifth to "Earthmen No More", sixth to "Short Order."—*3946 Legation Street, NW, Washington, D.C.*

We hope you get plenty of mail as a result of the above letter, Ellen. You might let us know the results in a month or so. We too are interested.

PAIR OF BROGUES
by Lin Carter

Dear Sam: Faith and Bejabbers, Samuel me bye, but 'tis a foine issue ye're after havin' here! Sure an' I do be after meanin' it, at all, at all. That cover—Oh, me sainted aunt—that one was after bein' the best kiver ye've had fer many-a-day. Why, an' one look at the little coleen on it—and one look into the fair green eyes of herself—is all it's after takin' to bring out me Irish. Sure an' the cover was a foine one and one to be praised at that. That foine Irish lad, Earle O'Bergey, is after outdoin' himself, bless his heart, and may he be after keepin' it up!

And even without the brogue, I must say the rest of the issue was as good as any you've published this year (meaning '50). *Starmen of Llyrdis* was the finest novel Brackett has done for you since *Sea Kings of Mars* in a '49 TWS and the best in Startling since *Shadow Over Mars.* It was a terrific job, with all her usual color and description, poetry and fire. And it had better-than-average characterization and plot, for her.

I'm not sure, but I think this story had a wider scope than most of her other stories. Usually she is content to write her novel around adventures on one world—Mars or Venus or Jupiter—but for *Starmen* she chose the immeasurably vaster canvas of an entire galaxy—from Sol to Aldebaran to Hercules and outward.

From details of the plot-structure and science used in this novel it seems apparent that Miss Brackett's husband, Ed Hamilton did considerable draft-reading and gave advice in the writing of it. It shows several unmistakable bits of Hamilton writing—the desperate mile-a-minute search for the Ship of Orthis, fighting against time and their all-powerful enemy—the last minute finding and using of the device to broadcast the secret just before Kerrel closed in—these are standard bits of Hamiltonania.

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For that matter all of Hamilton's writings published since his marriage have shown signs of Brackett's poetry and poignant emotion. Looks like the Hamilton-Brackett middle-aisleing has improved both their writing styles. Let me remark again how *very* much I liked this wonderful story. It was her best in years and years!

Ed Hamilton's next-to-last Cap Future tale, *Earthmen no More* was an exceptionally well-written story, poignant and atmospheric, with unusually good characterization. In fact I thought it had a little too much characterization and not quite enough action. These Cap Future novelets are, of course, much better writing than the old novels like *Quest Beyond the Stars*, or *The Comet Kings* or *Planets in Peril*, but sort of slow paced and talky. Makes one wish rather wistfully for one of the good old rousing adventure epics he used to write.

I'm very sorry to hear that with *Birthplace of Creation*, Cap Future and his friends will leave these pages. This reader, for one, has enjoyed the CF novelets more than all the other series you run, put together. Comparing Oona and Jick, Magnus Ridolph, the Hogbens and their ilk to Ed Hamilton's series is like comparing cheap beer to fine champagne. I'll be sorry to see the Futuremen go!

As for the rest of the stories, *The Two Shadows* was probably the best, being an extrapolation of the old conflict between brute force and intellectual power, the two being personafied in Malatesta and Johns. The only trouble was that Malatesta was a bitty too intellectual and not quite brutal and unlearned enough to be a convincing personification of brute force.

Men of the Ten Books was a rather clever story, and Sam Merwin's *Short Order* had a very surprising, rather *Bradburian* ending that left me numb. I read the thing not expecting anything more than a dull filler, and my expectations were fulfilled up to the last three paragraphs. It was a very good short—exceptional, in fact. The other story, *Then Fly Our Greetings* was just plain silly.

Letters were about average this time. L. L. Shepard had a nice letter and The Coles and Joe Gibson as usual. It was a pleasant surprise to see a letter from my old friend Phil Barker in these pages. And Bob Hoskins' summing up of 1950 was competent, and left little to be desired. One could wish for scintillating wits like Chad Oliver and Kennedy of yore but I suppose their day has passed and now that Our Magazine has "grown up" we shall see their like no more. So be it.

All in all, Sam, this issue has been of amazingly consistent high quality, with a fine cover, excellent novel, and unusually good brace of short stories. You'll really have to go some to top this one!—*1734 Newark St. So., St. Petersburg, Fla.*

Gad's teeth, Lin, such fluorescence! You have us wondering which of the Hamiltons writes what and for whom. But as long as the stories come in with the quality we have come to expect from either and/or both of this prize team we just don't give a darn. And, dear heart, there were *three*—count' em, 3—short

(Turn page)

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stories in the March SS. This constitutes a brace and a half, which is an unlikely designation at best. Better to have made it a covey, a pride, a litter, a flock, a school, a herd, or even a gaggle, wethinks.

SHERRY IN HER EYES
by Mrs. Sherry Andris

Dear Editor: I have only written two or three times in my long years of reading science fiction and fantasy stories. And it has been over a year since I have written to any editor. But I have just come back from a long journey and thought I would let you know.

It was a far far journey and returning is almost like returning to life after having died and attained heaven. For I have come back from the lonely rim of the galaxy and seen the awful dark beginning of creation. I have watched dark frozen worlds, dead before earth's fiery birth, wheel lonely and silent about blackened forgotten suns. I've watched faint starlight flicker futilely against the peaks and torn valleys of ancient, long ancient planets. I have looked into the awful majesty of uncounted light-years of deep space.

An author and a story have been my method of going—Leigh Brackett and The Starmen of Llyrdis. There is a haunting, perhaps a haunted quality to her work, which I had gradually become aware of and which suddenly came to life in this story. I have often tried to put in words the type of story I like—suddenly, this is it. Alien races, long-dead worlds, far-flung galaxies, come to life for her and thus for the reader. As though in some long forgotten incarnation she too trod the star worlds and knew the ancient life.

So thanks to you and Leigh Brackett and like the end of a particularly moving play or beautiful symphony, there can be no real applause but only a silent heartfelt—"more!"—*2181 Shurtleff Ave., Napa, Calif.*

Mrs. Andris, we're going to do a bit of futile flickering ourselves if we don't get more—and soon.

BACK TO NORMAL
by Helene Pomerantz

Dear Editor: I've been a faithful if silent TWS and SS reader for a year now (in which time I've read almost all the back issues for the past three years) and after making numerous mental notes to write I finally am. There are several things I've been wanting to say for some time now, so here goes—

1. For years everybody has kept telling poor Mr. Bergey to dispense with his scantily-clad fems. On the January SS and the February TWS covers he did. Awful!!! It was like losing an old friend—things just weren't the same—until I saw the March SS cover. At last, back are the fems—but this is a new, mature, more imaginative Bergey. From now on let's let Mr. B do the covers his own way. They're great!

2. Two stf stories that made tremendous impressions on me were "First Person Singular" in the October TWS and "The Follower" in a rival magazine, both by Eric Frank Russell. Maybe a lot of readers consider this type story the romantic goo that appeals to certain feminine readers but being a feminine reader I frankly admit I like it! Can we please have more Russell now and then?

Finally I'd like to say that I think SS and TWS are the best stf magazines on the market, are steadily improving all the time. Also artist Pete Poulton is very very good. He draws the handsomest men!

Just give us a minimum of fantasy and a maximum of good science fiction (especially Bradbury) and you'll have one completely satisfied reader.—*1239 15th Street, Miami Beach Florida.*

We have a left-handed hunch you are in for a bit of ear-chewing as a result of your Bradbury classification. We liked the first of the two Russell stories you mention else we wouldn't have run it—didn't read the second. We'll try to put out a magazine to please you whenever we can.

INFORMATION APPRECIATED
by Ed Seibel

Dear Sir: Awhile back our public library received a shipment of science fiction books. Among them were three that made my tongue hang out like a necktie. Since I've seen them I've been going frantic trying to find out where I can purchase them for my own private library.

Then I remembered that my two favorite science fiction magazines—SS and TWS—carried book reviews. Could you tell me where to send for these three volumes—OTHER WORLDS by Stong, THE WORLD OF A by A. E. van Vogt and (I think) A TREASURY OF SCIENCE FICTION? I would certainly appreciate the information.—*P.O. Box 445, Olivehurst, California.*

Let's see—THE OTHER WORLDS, edited by Phil Stong (of STATE FAIR fame) was published in 1941 by W. Funk, New York. THE WORLD OF NULL A by A. E. van Vogt was published, I think, in 1948 by Simon & Schuster, has recently been reprinted in dollar-book form by Grosset & Dunlap. Both are New York firms. As for A TREASURY OF SCIENCE FICTION, edited by Groff Conklin, it was published in 1948 by Crown Publishing Company, New York.

As to where you can get them, we have an idea you'll find out without moving a muscle very shortly. Then all you have to do is move a few bucks to the dealers to get them. Good luck. And that winds up another etherial vibration. But don't go away smiling—we'll be back. That is both a threat and a promise.

—THE EDITOR.

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SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

THE STARS LIKE DUST by Isaac Asimov, Doubleday Science Fiction, New York ($2.50).

MR. ASIMOV, in his newest novel, takes his readers on a swift, slick and intricate jaunt through a far-future and thoroughly galactic maze of high-echelon intrigue and power politics, with the "lost" preamble to the Constitution of the United States as its pivotal issue. His hero, heir presumptive to the leadership of a minor planet near the rim of the stars, is a naive and callow youth who finds his student life on Earth disrupted by the murder of his father.

From that moment on Biron Farrill finds himself at odds not only with the Spartan Tyranni—a hideously well-organized and aggressive culture from a group of "poor" plan-

ets out to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of the universe—but with the rulers of two of their subject systems, who wish to use Biron as a football in order to further their own devious ends.

Of course he falls for the princess daughter of the man generally believed responsible for his father's murder—and of course there is unholy heck to pay all around. This hugger-mugger, well larded with pseudo-scientific gimmicks and devices, is further complicated by a couple of quests—one for the already-mentioned U.S. Constitution, the other for a secret planet where underground revolt against the Tyranni is being organized.

If Mr. Asimov were not one of the most careful plotters and deftest word manipulators extant in stf today, THE STARS LIKE

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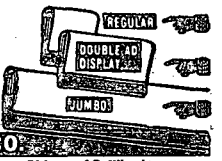

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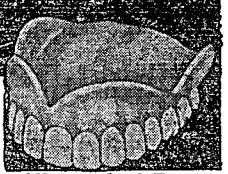

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DUST would be a senseless jumble of needless complexities. As it is, however, the author has magically achieved a thoroughly stirring piece of light fiction—reminiscent in the best sense of the suave novels of intrigue in which the late E. Phillips Oppenheim used to delight—and with which he delighted his readers.

SOLUTION T-25 by Theodora DuBois, Doubleday Science Fiction ($2.50).

Mrs. DuBois, a sterling veteran practitioner of the detective story, here turns her accomplished typewriter to a tale of Communist invasion of America in the very near future and its aftermath and ultimate repulse via a trick drug that turns the grim Communist upper brackets into a collection of overgrown playboys with the aggression of field mice.

The country—or rather its cities—are pretty well wiped out in the opening attacks and the final victory, as such, seems a pretty hollow thing. But chief characters John Dean, Dr. Sheridan, Joyce Van Velt and others, operating for the most part from Staten Island, are glad to bring even the sorry remnants of the U.S. out from under the invader's hobnailed heel.

Stock stuff, smoothly written for the most part, with very little science fiction to help it out. Coupled with Judith Merril's recent SHADOWS ON THE HEARTH it reveals a certain horrifying tendency toward the near future on the part of our woman authors, however. In Miss Merril's book, with action located in Westchester, we saw Manhattan destroyed. We now witness a similar occurrence from the other end—Staten Island. And we live smack on Lower Fifth Avenue. It gives us to shiver.

SIXTY DAYS TO LIVE by Dennis Wheatley, Hutchinson's Famous 6-shilling Library, London.

In this reissue of Mr. Wheatley's wild and very woolly version of S. Fowler Wright's DELUGE, we find not merely Manhattan or civilization in North America destroyed but virtually the entire world. The agent in this instance is not human in origin but stems from an errant asteroid that smacks poor old Terra head on, tilting the Earth's axis and causing a second Flood.

The characters followed by the author are culled strictly from the highlife of prewar Britain and for the most part pursue routine stock caperings throughout. However, the heroine, a minor British cinema star of good lineage who has just married herself off to a middle-aged industrialist, is intriguing because she is unashamedly selfish and frivolous and thoroughly unfaithful to her husband when the occasion demands.

An unlikely collection of such characters is assembled by the author in a sort of "ark"—a super lifeboat that is really a huge rubber ball. They ride out the flood and somehow, in a welter of remating, swinishness and noble sacrifice, manage to attain safety of a sort in the post-deluge world. On the whole, good moderately-unclean fun.

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REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

WE WOULD like in our preliminary gestures toward the sprawling phenomenon known as fanzinia to face southwest and smite our forehead thrice upon the linoleum parquet in reverence to Lilith Lorraine's CHALLENGE, a quarterly devoted to the poesy of science fantasy and published in Rogers, Arkansas.

In general the imagination of the poems seems to be more devoted to concept than form. In other words most of it rhymes and scans. But the urge toward verse forms is definitely a part of science fiction and we are gratified that sftlovers moved to meter should have such a competently-run outlet. We wish it luck along with a change of cover (gripe!).

Curtis Report

Curtis & Curtis of Veterans Village, Canton, New York, have published a sort of shockholder's report, complete with a graph depicting the Curtisian ups and downs of 1950—devoted to story sales, visits from the he-Curtis' mother-in-law and such mondanities as house loans and vacations. Everything about the Curtises seems delightfully stable excepting the cash on hand.

Also meriting mention outside of the regular listings is INCINERATIONS, out of Forrest C. Davis, Ruth Newberry and others by the Grape Press, 9109 S.W. Oleson Road, Portland 19, Oregon. Despite its stubbornly freshmanic iconoclasm, or perhaps because of it, we find it both refreshing and funny.

Other mention of merit should go to the incredibly busy James V. Taurasi, editor-publisher of the excellent FANTASY-TIMES, for his monthly single sheet entitled FAN-VET, for sftf-lovers in the armed forces. Also a nod for his secretary-right-bower Ray Van Houten. A nice job with a nice purpose.

Cinconvention Book

A year and a half after the event Messrs.

(Turn page)

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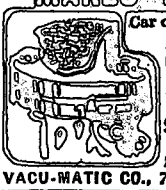

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Ford, Skirvin, Lavender and Tabakow (in that order) have come up with a workmanlike (despite two back covers) job in their CINCONVENTION MEMORY BOOK, published from P.O. Box #116, Sharonville, Ohio ($1.00). The contents page is sprinkled with such stf names as Lloyd Eschbach, Lester Del Ray, Jack Williamson, E. E. Smith Ph.D., Ted Carnell, Arthur J. Burks, Fritz Leiber Jr., Robert Bloch, Bob Tucker, Ray Palmer and Rog Phillips among others. Plenty of pictures too.

Our Chief castigators, Les & Es Cole, have combined with one Lee Jacobs in their 3040½ Adeline Street, Berkeley, California, love-nest to emerge with a Thing entitled ORGASM. Page five came up upside down but in general it is literate and amusing with much less bile than this reader expected. We wish the Coles luck with their ghastly title.

And finally, to wind up the preliminaries, none other than Bob Wilson Arthur Tucker has penned us an epistle to wit—

Cheerio: Far be it from me to complain sir, for after all every man likes his ego-boo whether it be for himself or his fanzine . . . but I would like to correct a misstatement in the Fanzine Review column of the latest STARTLING STORIES.

I dunno where you got the notion, but the price of Science Fiction News Letter has never been 25¢ a copy. In the beginning it was free, and about a year ago a price tag of 10¢ was put on. A few weeks ago the increased costs of lithographing forced me to raise the price to 15¢. So, beginning with the first 1951 issue, News Letter costs 15¢ a copy, seven for one dollar.

Apologies to you and the SF NEWS LETTER, Bob. We dunno either. Incidentally this excellent 'zine emerges from beneath the stones of Bloomington, Illinois (P.O. Box #260).

With which we shall be at our sacrosanct ten best fanzines for the past sixty-day period. First on our top list is—

DESTINY, 545 N.E. San Rafael, Portland 12, Oregon. Editors, Jim Bradley & Malcolm Willits. Published Quarterly. 15c per copy, 50c per annum.

A very neat if somewhat slim little job which is yanked into the first ten largely on the merits of an uproarious "switch" cartoon on page 10, initialed W and therefore probably by Malcolm Willits. It should have gone into the NEW YORKER alongside Peter Arno's immortal **Man in the Shower.**

EUSIFANO, 146 E. 12th, Eugene, Oregon. Editor, Rosco Wright. Published monthly. 10c per copy.

The funniest (involuntary, that is) open letter in too many months of fanzines, this one by Clyde Hanback, is topper in the Eighth Issue of this nicely printed 'zine. Second funniest item is the hyperbole on dianetics by one Clarence Rutherford. We suppose anyone named Clarence has a right to 'em. The artwork by the editor is exceptionally fine.

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FANTASY ADVERTISER, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, California. Editor, Ronald Squire. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 75c per annum.

Still the top 'zine for traders, dealers and collectors where stf is concerned. The February issue is further livened with reasonably interesting features contributed by Stanton A. Coblentz and Arthur C. Clarke. Mr. Coblentz is still lamenting the days when stf pro-stories were more concerned with science than with fiction. We disagree.

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-03 32nd Avenue, Flushing, New York. Editor, James V. Taurasi. Published bi-weekly. 10c per copy, 12 copies $1.00.

Still king of the fanewzines, Mr. Taurasi's' ubiquitous, not to say peripatetic little paper continues to be crammed with the information no true stfan can be without.

NEKROMANTIKON, 1905 Spruce Avenue, Kansas City 1, Missouri. Editor, Manly Banister. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, $1.00 per annum.

Far and away the best-printed job of the batch this time. Mr. Banister, in his editorial, has reduced Raymond F. Jones' 50,000,000 monkeys to a mere 10,000,000 but otherwise this handsome 'zine ranks just below pro level in both poetry and prose, a trifle below that in artwork. Coblentz, Loomis (Battell), Carter (Lin) and C. O. Betancourt lead the fictioneers this time. We give the edge—a very slight one—to Betancourt.

OPERATION FANTAST, 13 G.P. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 25 c/o G.P.O. England. Editor, Captain K. F. Slater. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 6 copies 75c.

This British entry continues to improve both in appearance and contents. Editor Slater's study of recent American prozines is excellent and his gossip column well studded with information. The second installment of F. G. Rayer's **Writing Science Fiction** makes it extremely logical and straightforward in process, although he perpetrates the unpardonable in stating, "Women have their places in some S.F. stories, but personally I cannot feel their ability to be half-nude yet warm in space fits in with the best type of story." Depends which half, Mr. Rayer.

RHODOMAGNETIC DIGEST, 2524 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley 4, California. Editor, Donald Baker Moore. Published bi-monthly. 25c per copy, ten copies $2.25.

Still fine stuff for the adult fan. Current issue, for instance, contains among a couple of dozen items, good articles on how insects fly by Raymond Wallace, a study of the gadget in stf pro-stories by Leland Sapiro, Don Fabun's scholarly study of the British Interplanetary Society, an obit for Olaf (Stapleton, that is) and a blast by Marion Zimmer Bradley at those pedants who insist science fiction be literature as well as what it is (whatever that may be).

SHANGRI-LA, 1305 Ingraham Street, Los Angeles 17, California. Editors, Rory Faulkner & Alan Hershey. Published irregularly. 15c per copy.

Arthur Jean Cox leads off the twenty-fifth issue with a lengthy look at the works of Clifford D. Simak and in general finds it good. William Blackbeard's study of **Weird Tales** is good as is most of the rest of the magazine. However, we cannot help but miss those wonderful minutes of the LASFS that in years gone by did so much to enliven "Shaggy." Somebody bring back those minutes, please!

SINISTERRA, 3200 Harvard N., Seattle 2, Washington. Editor, Philip Barker. Published quarterly. 25c per copy.

All about last Labor Day weekend and the Norcon—with plenty of words and pictures, both of considerable fan interest. Best fun in the book is

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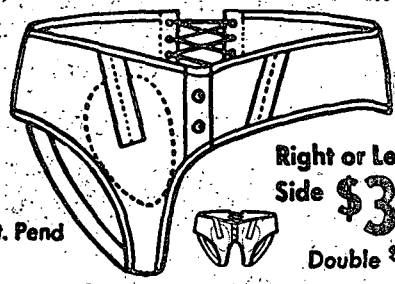

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hunting down the captions for said pictures. They are the most elusive we have ever encountered in a long editorial career.

SLANT, 170 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Editor, Walter A. Willis. Published quarterly. 25c per copy.

Editor Willis has come up with a very handsome 'zine for spring with a two-color space-ship cover and plenty of good fanfiction and features for the reader to choose from. Someday we hope to meet Ermengarde Fiske, author of the most remarkable **New York Letter** we have ever come across. But shame on Herr Willis for entitling a department **The Prying Fan.** Tsk, tsk!

A good if not especially spectacular first ten—which brings us to the pygidium of our review. We open the axework with—

ADOZINE, 2058 East Atlantic Street, Philadelphia 34, Pennsylvania. Editor unlisted. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy.

ASTRA'S TOWER, P.O. Box #431, Tahoka, Texas. Editor, Marion Zimmer Bradley. Published bi-monthly. No price listed.

CHIMERICAL REVIEW, 942 Scribner NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editor, unlisted. Published monthly. 15c per copy, 2 copies 25c.

COSMIC, P.O. Box #3013, Atlanta, Georgia. Editor, Ian T. Macauley. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, 6 copies 50c.

FAN-FARE, 119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York. Editor, W. Paul Ganley. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy; 65c per annum.

FANVARIETY, 420 South 11th Street, Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Editor, W. Max Keasler. Published monthly. 10c per copy, 12 copies $1.00.

THE IMAGINATIVE COLLECTOR, 203 Wampum, Louisville 9, Kentucky. Editor, Russell K. Watkins. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 2 copies 25c.

IMPOSSIBLE, address unlisted. Editor, Burnett R. Toskey. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

THE OUTLANDER, 1305 Ingraham Street, Los Angeles 17, California. Editor, John van Couvering. Published irregularly. 15c per copy.

PEON, Fleet All Weather Training Unit, Pacific, c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, California. Editor, Charles Lee Riddle, PN1, USN. Published quarterly. Single copies free, 9 copies $1.00.

QUANDRY, 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia. Editor, Lee Hoffman. Published monthly. 10c per copy, $1.00 per annum.

SAPSIDES, 3317 West 67th Street, Seattle 7, Washington. Editor, William N. Austin. Published quarterly. 12c per copy.

SIRIUS, 1308 Hoe Avenue, Bronx 59, New York. Editor, Stan Serxner. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy.

SKYLARK, 1047 Louisa Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey. Editor, Sid Gluck. Published irregularly. No price listed.

SPACESHIP, 760 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn 13, New York. Editors, Bob Silverberg & Saul Diskin. Published quarterly. 10c per copy, three copies 25c.

STEFCARD. P.O. Box #6, Helena, Montana. Editor, Walter A. Coslet. Published frequently. 6 cards free on request, 45 cards $1.00.

THE WEEPER, P.O. Box #193, Litchfield, Illinois. Editor, L. L. Shepherd. Published bi-monthly. 15c per copy, 4 copies 50c.

ZOBBLE, 378 Cascade Hall, University of Washington, Seattle 5, Washington. Editor, Wally Weber. Published irregularly. No price listed.

For once the above list is unusually strong. Keep it up and move into the more rarefied atmoshere of the first ten. The water's fine up there. See you back in this space in a couple of months.

—THE EDITOR.

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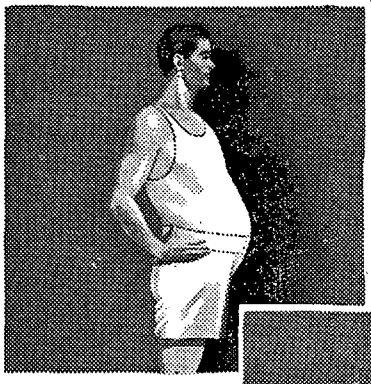

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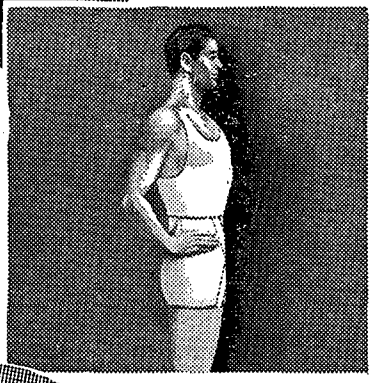

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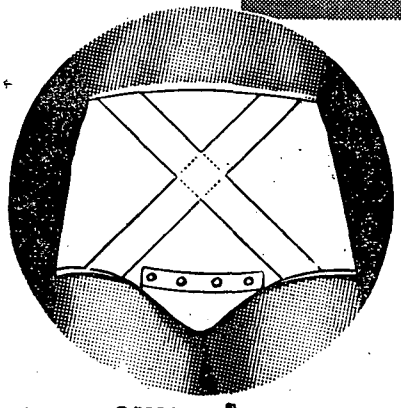

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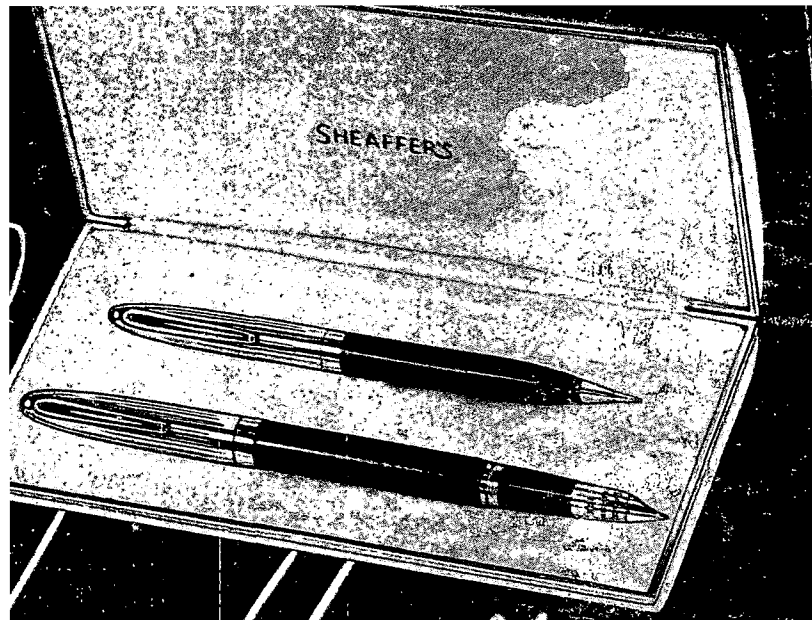

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